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Kalighat Painting

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Images from a Changing World

Jyotindra Jain

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Frontispiece
Kali of Kalighat
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 17 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D3

It is this image of Kali of Kalighat that was the premier pilgrim souvenir sold in the shops and kiosks around the famous shrine of the goddess in Calcutta. Painted clay figures of the goddess in this form too constituted a part of the religious merchandise. Today the same establishments sell framed pictures, postcards, and holograms depicting the goddess.

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Note:

- Based upon the Survey of India map with permission of the Surveyor General of India.
- Copyright 1990, Government of India.
- The territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured from the appropriate base line.
- Responsibility for the correctness of internal details shown on the main map rests with the publisher.
- The boundary of Meghalaya shown on this map is as interpreted from the North-Eastern areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971, but has yet to be verified.

Kalighat
Engraving
F B Solvyns
Les Hindous, Vol. II, Paris, 1802

Introduction

The phrase '*patas* of Kalighat' was used by Ajit Ghose as long ago as in 1926[1] and 'drawings and paintings of Kalighat' by Mukul Dey in 1932,[2] both with reference to a class of paintings executed in watercolour on mill-made paper in a characteristic new idiom, primarily by scroll painters-cum-potters, who had migrated in the nineteenth century from the villages of Bengal to the city of Calcutta. These *patuas* set up their 'shop–studios' chiefly around the Kalighat temple, and therefore the term 'Kalighat' got coined, almost inadvertently, to denote these paintings; an occurrence that does not preclude the possibility that paintings of this genre were also produced and sold in the bazaars and fairs in the environs of other places of religious significance in Calcutta.

From the surviving evidence it can be said with reasonable certainty that the paintings of this class did not predate the beginning of the nineteenth century and did not continue in their original form after the first quarter of the twentieth. The idiom eventually dissipated into the graphic arts of woodcuts and engravings and was subsequently replaced by cheap lithographic and oleographic prints that flooded the markets of Calcutta in the first half of the twentieth century.

Writing histories of Indian art, in the nineteenth century had as its primary purpose, researching the 'fine' and 'classical' elements in Indian sculpture, painting, and architecture seen through the prism of Sanskrit texts which were deemed to be the equivalents of European classics. That is how the conception of pristine 'classical' Indian art came about, sanctified by a self-contained canon. To nineteenth century administrator-scholars and archaeologists, the word of the book was more comprehensible, convincing, and reliable than the living regional practices that were diversified to the extent of becoming amorphous, and difficult to evaluate.

The discourse that the Sanskrit texts epitomised the purest and most original form of Indian culture, and that the regional living traditions represented degenerate expressions of them, dominated writings on the history of Indian art and culture in the nineteenth century and, to a degree, continued to be an important concern throughout the twentieth. This approach to the study of Indian art ran parallel to the then prevalent method of indological research that virtually stood for comparative and historical linguistics. Both were text-centred and both considered regional expression—creations of rural visual forms in the former case and the use of local vocabulary in the latter—to be corrupted or derivative versions of the Sanskrit originals.

In this hallowed space of art history, the folk art of the *patua* scrollpainters and the highly innovative and contemporary pictorial

expression of the Kalighat artists (and many such living traditions spread across India) had no place, as these did not have the authority of the sacred text. However, due to the enormous demand for 'art manufacturer's of India', great industrial art exhibitions were frequently organised in Europe and occasionally Kalighat paintings (and so also examples of schools of Indian miniature painting) were bunched together with the so-called decorative arts and, as such, were shown in exhibitions and cursorily mentioned in their catalogues.[3]

European visitors to Calcutta in the second half of the nineteenth century had begun to bring home albums of Kalighat paintings more as Indian curiosities or as compendia of Hindu iconography than as works of artistic merit. At that time only the Kalighat painting offered a comprehensive range of illustrations depicting the iconography of virtually all the Hindu gods and goddesses, including their incarnations and alternative forms. No wonder then that W.J. Wilkins' *Hindu Mythology*, first published in 1882, was illustrated with nearly fifty Kalighat-type drawings.[4]

It was only after the first quarter of the twentieth century that artists and art-critics began to pay serious attention to this genre. Issues concerning the survival and revival of the 'Indian tradition' dominated the art–historical discourse at the turn of the century, particularly in relation to folk arts and crafts. The British élite was driven by the perceived threat to the applied or industrial arts in Britain and India in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The tide of Westernisation was seen to be sweeping over the entire Indian art scene from which it needed to be rescued: 'foreign forms of ornament are being constantly introduced into the country; and so rapidly are they spreading, that there is real fear that they may at last irrevocably vitiate the native tradition of the decorative art of India'.[5] What had survived required to be salvaged in its pure form and what had been lost needed to be revived. India's true spirit and authenticity was perceived in its past heritage, and its protection and revival suited both the orientalists and the nationalists of the time. While the historians of the so-called 'classical' Indian arts were busy reconstructing national histories on the basis of archaeological material, protagonists of the 'folk' stressed the view that 'the living traditions of the distinctive arts of each province existed in an almost unbroken current in its rural areas from remote antiquity'.[6] Along with the entire colonial Indian art establishment, comprising archaeological and indological research as well as the inculcation of European aesthetic tastes and terminology of art criticism, the belief that the Indian villager was a direct descendant and carrier of an unbroken tradition from hoary antiquity also came into being. The need to protect, document, and revive the rural forms of art was acutely felt. Once again the realisation of the importance of these traditions and the models for their preservation and revival came from the West. As an illustration, let us take one typical instance. Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941), a Civil Servant and a zealous protagonist of the folk arts of Bengal in the early years of the twentieth century, has gone on record that after watching the 'All England Folk Dance Festival' at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1929, he felt so moved

and inspired that he resolved to devote himself on his return to India to the conservation of the village dances of his province.[7] In one of his speeches,[8] he showered unlimited praise on Cecil Sharp, who had made a pioneering contribution to the revival of old English folk dances and songs that had been on the verge of extinction at the beginning of this century. Somewhere along these lines a wave of recognition and celebration of the folk and tribal traditions of art swept Bengal, and among other forms of rural cultural expression, Kalighat *patas* came to be collected and acclaimed in the art criticism of the time.

One of the earliest and most perceptive pieces of writing on Kalighat painting was by Ajit Ghose. His description of the quality of drawing in these paintings has remained unsurpassed to date and deserves to be quoted at length:

> In the *pata* drawings there is a boldness and vigour in the brush line which may be compared to Chinese calligraphy. ... The drawing is made with one long bold sweep of the brush in which not the faintest suspicion of even a momentary indecision, not the slightest tremor, can be detected,. Often the line takes in the whole figure in such a way that it defies you to say where the artist's brush first touched the paper or where it finished its work..... Where we find that an outline had been drawn in pencil to serve as a rough guide, the critical sense of the artist has often left it untouched when his brush rapidly made the final drawing.[9]

Writing six years later, Mukul Dey[10] talked about the drawings and paintings of Kalighat being 'bold and attractive' and their technique being 'different and simple'; that they looked 'absolutely distinctive'. In contrast, Gurusaday Dutt, though an ardent collector of Kalighat paintings in Bengal, described this genre as 'corrupted by town influence'. For Dutt, storytellers' scroll paintings drawn by the 'hereditary race of *patuas* were' of 'highest artistic importance', because they had a 'classic stage of excellence' and would 'stand very favourable comparison with the classic stage of any other school in India or elsewhere'.[11]

Sudhansu Kumar Ray (1953), an associate of Gurusaday Dutt, undertook a survey of the "Artisan Castes of West Bengal and their Craft" under the framework of census operations, which included formidable sections on *patuas*, *kumors*, and *sutradhars*. Such ethnographic surveys and documentation of artisans, including the *patuas*, continued until the end of the 1970s, the more notable contributions in this sphere being made by Pradyot Ghosh (1960), Sankar Sen Gupta, Binoy Bhattacharya, Bholanath Bhattacharya, Prabhat Kumar Das, and Rabindranath Ganguli (all 1972). Binoy Bhattacharjee (1980) and Benoy Ghose (1981) conducted sociological studies of the *patuas* and other artisans of Bengal.

W.G. Archer, however, occupies the position of a pioneer of serious scholarly research on Kalighat painting. But for his publications (especially of 1953, 1962, and 1971), the subject, in all likelihood, would have been vanished into oblivion. Almost all

scholars of Kalighat painting who followed W..G. Archer have either reaffirmed and reiterated his views or have contested them within the framework of ideas propounded by him. His emphasis on the role of British influence on the genesis of the Kalighat 'style' made him the subject of contentious debate, principal proponent of the contrary view being B.N. Mukherjee who vehemently argued that 'indigenous technique and style, obtainable socio-economic conditions, and increasing socio-religious demand from a clientele ... created the Kalighat style'.[12]

Hana Knizkova, in her path-breaking monograph *The Drawings of the Kalighat Style*, differed from Archer's theory of Western origin and stresses that 'to regard the birth of the drawings ... as the direct result of European influence is disputable ...'.[13] Her most original contribution lies in contextualising the origin and development of the Kalighat style within the broad parameters of traditional craft practices as well as the modern influences prevalent in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Knizkova willy-nilly subscribed to Archer's theory of chronological periodisation based on stylistic evolution.

Sumanta Banerjee's insightful account[14] of the changing society of nineteenth century Calcutta and the satirising of the religious hypocrisy and foppish dandyism of the babus and other trends so forcefully depicted by the Kalighat artists, and Tapati Guha-Thakurta's analysis[15] that within the rural folk tradition of the *pat* painting, the Kalighat paintings emerged as a major departure and that their inventiveness lay in the manner in which the *patuas* adopted to their new urban environment, are among the most stimulating approaches to the subject.

Apart from being creatures of their inherited traditions and their changing social environment, the creators of Kalighat painting were first and foremost artists. They expressed themselves in a visual language that they continuously recalibrated in line with changes occurring in their immediate environment—the emergence of new lifestyle and aesthetic norms, shifting standards of morality, the influx of new imagery as products of the age of mechanical reproduction. They realised that, if the language through which they expressed themselves was to be an effective tool, they had to be aware of the potential of both its emic and etic structures. As artists, how they confronted changes, how they saw in the process of transformation itself, the essence of expression, and how they articulated the pictorial language, is the theme of this book.

Kalighat painting stemmed from the changing world of Calcutta, where layering and the juxtaposition of old and new images overlapped on a transparent plane, as it were, one upon the other. Traditionally inherited techniques, iconographies, and artistic practices co-mingled with revivalistic Mughal court culture, Sanskrit drama, the proscenium stage, and swiftly churned out and circulated images from photo-studios and lithographic presses in the fast-growing urban centre, translating folk art forms into popular genres.

Chapter 2 emphatically negates the earlier dichotomic view of a European or indigenous origin of Kalighat painting and brings into focus the multi-pronged and complex cultural situation of nineteenth century Calcutta to which the Kalighat artists adapted and brilliantly responded. The much disputed question of 'shading' has been discussed in a more intricate framework of the *patuas'* composite occupation of scrollpainting, fashioning clay figures and painting them, and their conjunctive professional practice with the *kumor* potters for whom too they often worked as painters.

Somewhere between these traditional practices, with the introduction of new translucent watercolours and the exposure to Western academic shading, the Kalighat artists evolved a language of illusion of the third dimension that led the contour itself to become a simplified but compelling version of elaborate chiaroscuro.

The fast growing metropolis of Calcutta, the capital of British India, with its increasing popularity as a centre of national and international trade and that of Kalighat as a centre of pilgrimage, when connected with the railways and other means of improved transport and communication, saw a massive influx of tourists, traders, and pilgrims who desired typical and easily portable souvenirs to carry home. This demand was primarily fulfilled by the Kalighat painters who had evolved a new contemporary idiom of painting, treating their earlier practices of narrative scroll painting and fashioning tableauesque clay figures as points of departure. While working under the heavy pressure of market demand, they evolved a style in which speed of execution played a determining role.

Considering the heterogeneity of idioms in which 'Kalighat paintings' are available, it has been pointed out in this chapter that besides *patuas*, several other traditional practitioners of arts and crafts such as *sutradhar* carpenters, *bhaskara* stone workers, and *kumor* potters, were also active in the field. On the basis of a comparative study of sketchbooks, aide mémoire drawings, woodcarvings, wall paintings, and canvasses assignable to carpenters, and certain 'Kalighat' albums of paintings expressed in their characteristic dialect, it has been shown that *sutradhar* carpenters, with their experience in making three-dimensional forms, brought into their painting a luminous, dramatic effect of lighting more akin to still life or a theatrical tableau than real life or nature.

As the idiom and its market stabilised, the artists began to liberate themselves from the narrow precincts of the normative religious iconography to expand into the world of contemporary social events, and in terms of formal painting construction moved out of the self-contained narrative or the drama of the participant characters staged within the confines of its own rectangular picture frame, to flirt with the onlooker. The characters began to look out and stare at the audience or establish a communion with the viewer.

Chapter 3 takes into account the impact of changing methods of observing traditional rituals, the introduction of photography,

Western-style theatrical performances, art schools and the university system of education; the proliferation of printed images, the rise of the babu culture as a by-product of the British administrative system as well as that of the culture and lifestyle of the nouveau riche of Calcutta; the desire of the upwardly mobile Bengali *bhadralok* for social proximity to British colonial settlers and to consciously distance themselves socially from the local lower and middle classes, on the one hand, and the latter's sharp perception of the absurdities arising out of the pseudo-imitations of the European social values by the Calcutta élite. All this gave birth to a new imagery that occupied the centre-stage of the Bengali literature, theatre and visual arts of the period, and Kalighat painting became its clearest mirror. Now the artists added to the menagerie of their sacred images, those of foppish babus, trendy bibis, dimwit dandies and seductive courtesans. The Kalighat painters did not fail to observe the iconisation of theatre heroines and actresses, Victorian chairs, rippled curtains, mannerisms of babus, bibis, and courtesans, contemporary social scandals, the appeal of the European prints that were flooding the market, the background scenery of photo studios, the peculiar carte-de-visite posturing and gesturing of the sitter, as he conceptualised new contemporary images. In doing so he took his cues largely from the pre-existing models of goddesses and divine consorts. When the Sitas, Parvatis, Annapurnas, Sarasvatis, and Lakshmis, shed their thrones, their crowns, their haloes, their iconographic emblems, their vehicles and lotus pedestals, and their mythological locale in favour of Victorian chairs, fancy attire and coiffure, and took on new emblems such as smoking pipes, and more seductive stances and gazes, they emerged in their new role as courtesans, dandies, actresses, and heroines.

The chapter also discusses how Western-style theatre influenced certain pictorial conceptions of Kalighat painting, illustrating the point with comparative analysis of theatrical texts and performances relating to the Tarakeshwar scandal and their direct impact on Kalighat painting. Sitting in the bazaar and candidly reflecting, in their work, the surrounding social environment, the Kalighat painters not only became the first contemporaries of Indian art, but in a manner of speaking, anticipated the popular culture of the twentieth century that was to follow.

Chapter 4 critically examines the pitfalls of chronological periodisation constructed on the basis of imaginary stylistic variations that have often been presumed to pervade the genre by several earlier scholars.

Given the absence of a single unified homogeneous style with definitely identifiable signs of infancy, maturity, and degeneration; the lack of stylistic certitude due to collective production of the paintings, and the role played by artists coming from a variegated artistic heritage and levels of maturity, it has not been possible to establish a valid theory of stylistic development as the basis for dating these paintings.

The degree of articulation of the pictorial language primarily comprising vestigial rather than realistic rendering of chiaroscuro—academically misunderstood, incomplete, deceptive, often non-functional but effectively abbreviated—is the basis of the charm that the paintings radiate. It is this earthy method of evoking an illusion of volume so well articulated and perfected as to become a cogent tool in the hands of the Kalighat artists that has endowed their figures with a fine sense of tangible sensuousness and unique enchantment. Produced under massive pressure of market demand, speed of execution did become a determining factor but it was this very speed which gave the painting the sustained tension of forms and confident movement of lines surging towards their predestined targets which then became the most essential and admirable constituent of the genre. The language of expression of the Kalighat painters is analysed in Chapter 5.

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1 Ajit Ghose (1926: 103).
2 Mukul Dey (1932: 28).
3 T.N. Mukharji (1888: 20).
4 W.J. Wilkins (1882).
5 G.C.M. Birdwood (1880: 132).
6 Gurusaday Dutt (1990: xvii).
7 Ibid., xv.
8 Ibid., 7.
9 Ajit Ghose, op. cit.,
10 Mukul Dey, op. cit.
11 Gurusaday Dutt, op. cit., 67–68.
12 B.N. Mukherjee (1984: 11).
13 Hana Knizkova (1975: 23).
14 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 130 –37).
15 Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1992: 19).

Fig. 1

The Genesis of Kalighat Painting

The period of Kalighat painting[1] coincides with Calcutta's 'age of mechanical reproduction': woodcut, lithography, oleography, printing, etc. The unforeseen proliferation and mass consumption of the resultant new imagery in the city led to a remarkable transformation in the conceptualisation and construction of the visual image, and Kalighat painting was no exception to this. This era of mechanical replication in combination with the introduction of photography, European-style theatre, British paintings and art schools had a dual complementary interaction with the folk culture of the city exemplified by the *jatra*, song and dance based open-air theatre; *putul nach*, puppet theatre; *swang*, pantomime shows; *panchali*, religious singing in combination with recitation; the production of cultic paintings and images; the manner of celebrating religious festivals and the general lifestyle. These, on the one hand, resisted the change, often with sarcastic ridicule and, on the other, adopted many of its features in their professional practice, even to the extent of using them as tools for more effective expression and a wider outreach. While savouring the transition, the city was developing a taste for popular culture.

The story of Kalighat painting is the story of the transformation of a folk art form into a popular genre; of a robust encounter of rural artists who had migrated to the city of Calcutta with the forces that operated there in the nineteenth century: the new manners and customs of the British settlers that had percolated in varying degrees to different social and economic strata in combination with revivalistic exercises in the past practices of Mughal court culture, the new avatar of Sanskrit drama on the proscenium stage, and the various products of the new technology of mechanical replication.

Kalighat painting, arising out of this composite cultural web, grew to be at once urban, uninhibited, innovative, and liberal.

The Role of Painter–Modellers

The exposure to British paintings with their shaded figures and the introduction of watercolour, folio-sized mill-made paper and, in the later phase, photography, Western-style theatrical performances, art schools, and mechanised reproduction techniques, may have played an important role in the development of new imagery and consolidation of some of the stylistic features of Kalighat painting, notwithstanding pre-existing seventeenth and eighteenth century painted manuscripts. For the emergence of the Kalighat idiom one must more importantly look at the traditional art practices of the *patuas* and potters of Bengal, many of whom had migrated to Calcutta and were instrumental in the development of this genre of painting. Equally crucial is the role played by the *sutradhars* and *bhaskars*, carpenters and stoneworkers, who are also known to have practised a style of painting that shared great similarities with the Kalighat genre.

Fig. 1
Shiva
Detail of a *chalchitra*, work of *kumor* potters, early 20th century.
Watercolour on paper
660 x 75 cm (full size)
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 514

In all probability the *chalchitra* or halo to be placed around the image of Durga, worshipped on the occasion of Durga puja in Bengal, is the work of a potter from Kumortuli, Calcutta. This *chalchitra*, depicting the myths of Shiva, shows attempts at shading that could have resulted from the potters' practice in fashioning clay figures or from exposure to the work of Kalighat artists. Considering the lucrative souvenir market available to Kalighat type paintings in Calcutta, it is not improbable that *kumor* potters, along with *patuas* and *sutradhars*, were also engaged in producing them.

Fig. 2

Fig. 2
Durga / Kali
Detail of a *chalchitra*, work of *kumor* potters, early 20th century.
Watercolour on paper
650 x 75 cm (full size)
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 514

For detailed analysis of the treatment of forms and the painterly practice of *kumor* potters, *see* caption to Fig. 1

The almost polemic debate on the origin of Kalighat style, and whether it stemmed from the earlier tradition of manuscript painting and *patua* scroll painting or was a result of exposure to European artistic conventions where every contour was shaded in the European fashion,[2] has so blindingly arrested scholarly attention, and for so long, that unfortunately the complex cultural situation of early nineteenth century Calcutta from which the Kalighat painters drew their inspiration has tended to be completely ignored. I shall discuss the nature and content of this debate a little later. It may however be pointed out here that intensive scrutiny of the complex set of materials available on the social and professional situations of the painters and potters of Calcutta will make it evident that the simplistic notion that the *patua* scroll painters, who had migrated to Calcutta from nearby provinces, altered their earlier idioms of scroll painting to give birth to a unified mode of pictorial expression that in time became known as the 'Kalighat Style', needs to be revised. Within the combined professional practices of the *patua*s as scroll painters, who also made clay images and painted them, and the *kumor* potters, who too painted on paper and clay objects, and a few other professional groups such as carpenters, there existed several conventional stylistic features that, in conjunction with certain technical innovations and changing norms of social and religious customs of Calcutta, contributed very substantially to the formation of a range of related styles that were later clubbed together and branded 'Kalighat'.

One of the characteristic features that makes the Kalighat style of painting so typical and unparalleled is the artists' unique handling

of the pictorial form. A sense of volume can be evoked in painting either by the emphatic use of light and shade or by proficient linear treatment of form. The Kalighat painters did not practise what would be the equivalent of the Western academic method of shading to convey an illusion of the third dimension but pursued a technique in which the contour itself became a reduced and simplified but compelling version of elaborate chiaroscuro, and as such performed the task of an astonishingly graphic and vigorous line. The delineation of form and volume through contours, more in the nature of rapid, unmediated sweeps automatically swelling and thinning as they progress in conformity with the object's perceived plasticity, is the essence of this style of painting.

A close look at the paintings would indicate that the intention of the painters was not to practise shading in the sense of distribution of light and dark masses to simulate an effect of depth, as is done in realistic painting, but to construct a three-dimensional image emphasising volume more through the vision of a modeller than that of a painter. In other words, the treatment of form was in the way the plastic material was shaped rather than painting by using academic chiaroscuro that would presume a definite source of light resulting in a coordinated scheme of shadows cognately pervading the entire painting. It is due to this modeller's setting, in which the figures appear detached from the background–indeed, as required by such a setting–that the artist painted hardly any background.

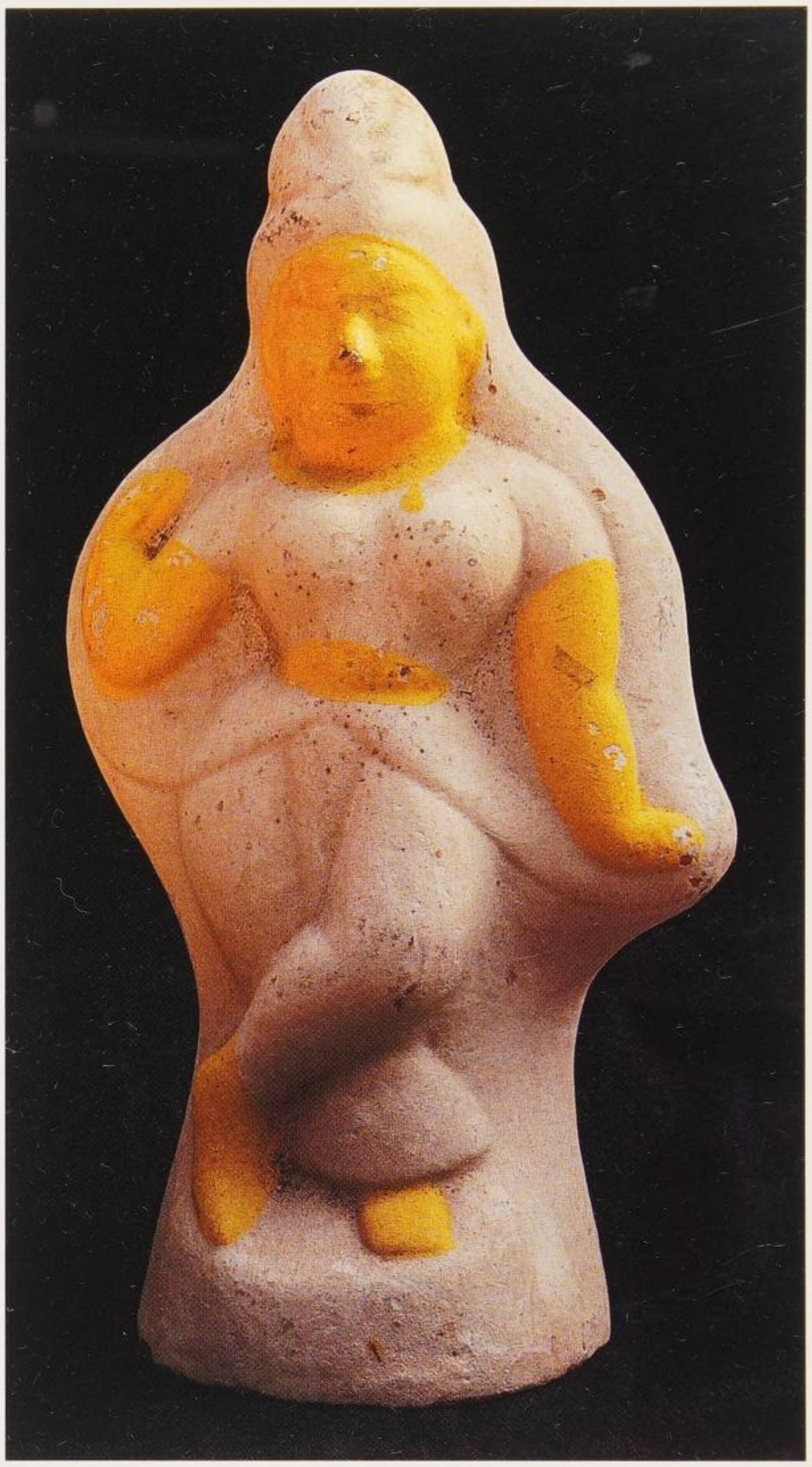

Fig. 3

Fig. 3
Radha
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, c. 15 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 7795 (43)

It has been commonly believed that the *patua* scroll painters, who had begun to migrate to Calcutta at least from the beginning of the nineteenth century and settled in several localities of the city, of which Patuapara near the Kalighat temple and Patuatola situated in central Calcutta, are the best known, created a new style of painting, partly deriving the novelty of the style from the influence of newly introduced European artistic norms and partly based on the traditional scroll painters' idiom. Though this may be generally true, rarely has a scholar identified definite stylistic features that could have resulted from the so-called European influence or could have stemmed from the resumption of the *patua* scroll painters' mode of expression. Hana Knizkova points out that 'this style has no parallel in Indian painting',[3] that 'the style of the drawing has nothing in common with European models or the natural history drawings',[4] and that 'completely different artistic principles are behind its characteristic, original features'.[5] She and others have rightly emphasised that the painters 'tried not to shade but to give volume to forms, modelling

them to add a third dimension' due to their 'practice in modelling'. Hardly any scholar has, however, with concrete examples, pointed to the striking parallels that existed between the Kalighat paintings and the painted clay figures of deities, and the intrinsic professional interconnections that traditionally existed between the work of the *patua*s as painters *per se* and as modellers and painters of clay images, and between this dual practice of theirs and that of the *kumor* potters who again were, at least marginally, involved in painting clay figures, *sara* (earthen discs), and *chalchitra* (a semicircular paper arch placed behind the image of Durga, in and around Calcutta) (Fig. 1, 2). One of the objectives of this chapter is to bring into focus the combined role of the *patua*s, *kumor*s, and *sutradhar*s as painters and modellers of three-dimensional images and the influences that this aspect of their professional practice may have had on the origin of Kalighat style of painting. There are several references to *patua* scroll painters traditionally engaging themselves in modelling or moulding religious images and clay dolls, and painting them or taking commissions to paint clay images for the *kumor* potters. It has been recorded that the women of the *patua* scroll painters' castes of Midnapur, Bankura, Howrah, and 24 Parganas were used to making clay dolls, figures of deities, and animals. Among the religious idols made by them were those of Krishna–Radha, Krishna–Balarama, Kartika, Ganesha–Janani, Durga, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Ganesha, Gaur–Nitai, Mahadeva, etc., which were all subjects commonly painted by the Kalighat artists. The favourite colours of these *patua*-made dolls were green, red, yellow, and blue.[6] These scroll painters are known to have supplemented their income from picture shows by making and selling such painted clay figures at fairs and weekly markets. The male *patua*s confined themselves to religious image making while their women made dolls.[7]

T. N. Mukharji noted in 1888 that, apart from practising watercolour painting, the *patua*s also painted idols for worship,[8] and this trend is further confirmed by several later observers and scholars. Ajit Ghose records in 1926 that in addition to producing paintings, the *patua*s modelled clay icons and toys.[9] Some scholars, on the basis of their study of the legends of *patua*s, have been inclined to infer that the *patua*s were the traditionally authorised makers of the sacred idols for worship by Hindus till their conversion to Islam.[10] According to legend, the *patua*s, who originated as a result of a union between the god Vishvakarma and a celestial nymph, earned their livelihood by painting scrolls and making idols of Hindu gods and goddesses . In one such legend, once Mahadev saw a *patua* defiling his brush by putting it in his mouth. Enraged, Mahadev put a curse upon the *patua*s to the effect that from then onwards they would become Muslims, but on their heartfelt pleas for mercy, Mahadev modified the curse: "you would earn your livelihood by drawing the pictures and *making idols of Hindu gods and goddesses* [emphasis added], but follow the rules and regulations of Muslims."[11]

Besides making and painting dolls and clay figures of deities, the *patua*s also undertook commissions to paint clay images made by the potters. A mid-nineteenth century folk poet has recorded the process: 'First the *'kumor'* works, then the painter starts. With earthen

Fig. 4

Fig. 4
Technique of Painting–I
Kalighat, work of Nibaran Chandra Ghosh (c. 1835–1930).
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.32-1952
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Unfinished water colours such as this one as well as *Fig.* 5, 6, and 7 provide valuable information about the Kalighat artist's method of working. The various stages of completion of paintings inform us how first a pencil drawing was done, and then the face and exposed limbs of a figure were coloured, one colour at a time. The final outlines and fine details were completed at the end. Remarkably, the same method was used by *patua* painters to paint clay figures fashioned by *kumor* potters.

colours he paints numerous figures on the *chal*(*chitra*), carefully using his brush.[12] Even today the potters of Kumortuli, a mid-eighteenth century settlement in north Calcutta, make clay images of Hindu deities on a large scale and paint them themselves or employ the services of professional painters for the purpose. Kumortuli or the potters' colony originally comprised clay-modellers who came from Banshbedey, Nabadwip, Krishnanagar, and Shantipur.[13]

It may be noted that in the nineteenth century the potters of Bengal painted their baked clay images with lead for red, arsenic for yellow, indigo for blue, arsenic and indigo for green, and lampblack or

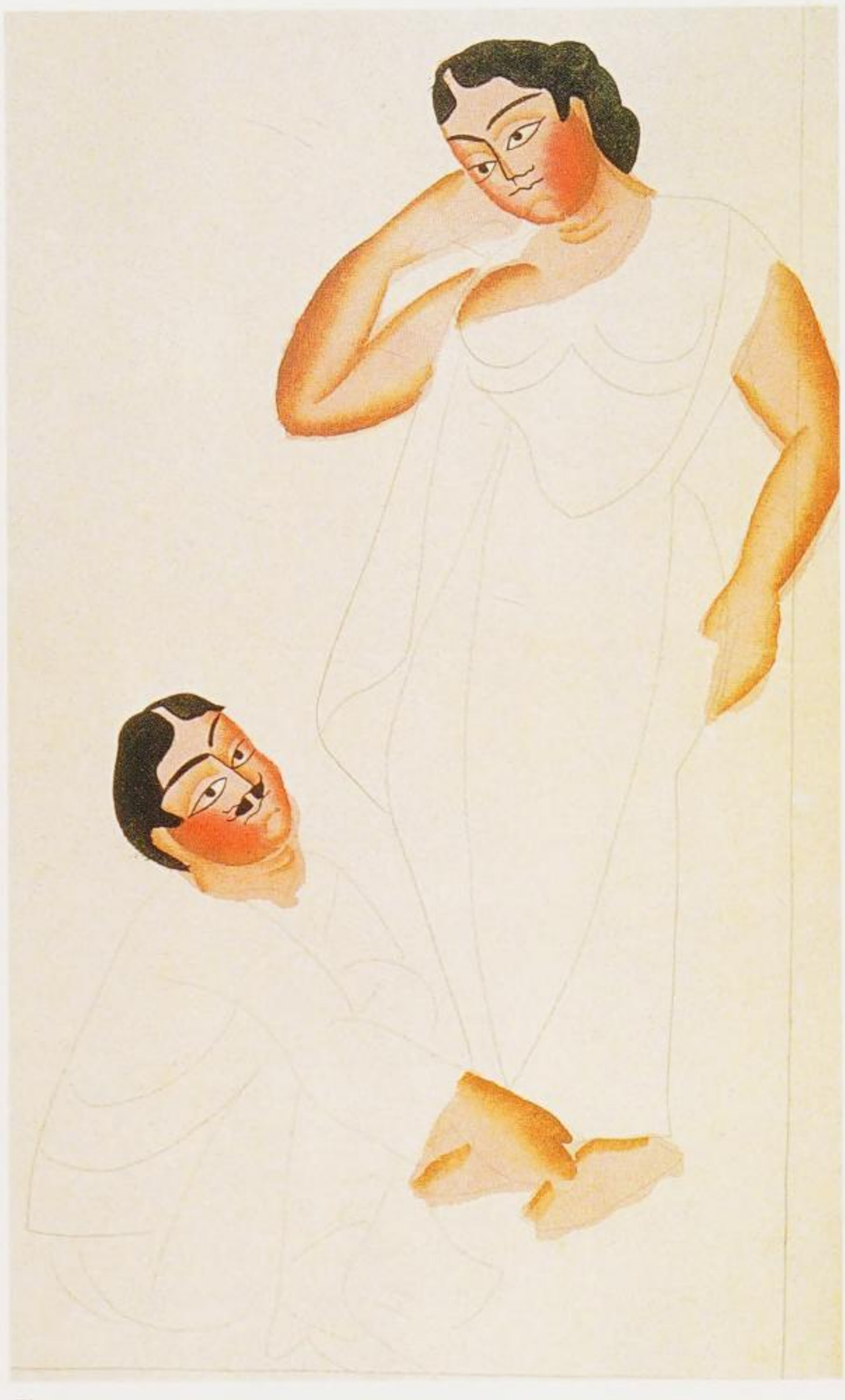

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 5
Technique of Painting–2
Kalighat
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.33-1952
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

See caption to *Fig.* 4

Fig. 6
Technique of Painting–3
Kalighat
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.35-1952
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

See caption to *Fig.* 4

charred paddy or coconut shell for black. These substances were mixed with mucilage obtained from *bela* or tamarind seeds. The glue strongly bonded the pigment to the surface of the terracotta object.[14] Interestingly, Jogen Patua, a renowned scroll painter of Chandipur (Howrah district), who was born in Midnapur in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, has recorded the same method of preparing pigment for scroll painting. He usually did so by mixing colours with the paste of boiled tamarind seeds.[15] Though paper and clay have two completely different surfaces and would normally require two different kinds of techniques, pigments, and binding substances, the *patuas* used the same method for both, probably because they were used to painting clay figures and *pats* simultaneously. In all likelihood this was originally a potters' technique that was subsequently adopted for painting on paper with the requisite technical adjustments. This point has also been stressed by Sudhansu Kumar Ray, a meticulous ethnographer and field researcher of the folk arts of Bengal in the 1930s and '40s. According to Ray too, tamarind-seed paste was normally used as a binder of colours applied on images and dolls but not for painting on paper.[16]

Jogen Patua also applied a paste of lime or chalk upon the paper after which the *pat* was ready for painting.[17] This technique is

Fig. 7

typical for treating a hard surface, such as that of a terracotta object or a wooden plank or a canvas,[18] before painting on it, rather than for painting on paper. Fig. 3, a partially painted terracotta image of a woman (possibly Radha) from Bengal, clearly illustrates the point that the painter first coated the image with lime or chalk and then applied the colours, one at a time. The face and the exposed limbs of the image were painted first. Interestingly, the *patua* scroll painters as well as the painters of the Kalighat *pat*s used the same method of sequencing the application of colour, i.e. one colour at a time with the face and exposed limbs being painted first. This is well illustrated by Fig. 4, an incomplete Kalighat *pat*, identified as the work of Nibaran Chandra Ghosh (c. 1835–1930),[19] where the faces and exposed parts of the bodies of the male and female figures have been painted first, and in a single colour. Subsequent stages of coloration can be seen in Fig. 5, 6 and 7. This comparison further strengthens the case for the composite

Fig. 7
Technique of Painting–4
Kalighat
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.36-1952
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

See caption to Fig. 4.

professional practices of painting clay images and *pats* and their possible impact on the accentuated orbicular forms of the Kalighat paintings.

Another strikingly common feature of this composite art practice is the presence or absence of a *chala* or halo around the figures of deities. It is remarkable that both the clay image makers and the painters of the Kalighat *pats* do not show a halo around any male deity (except occasionally around Ganesha), and generally avoid doing so around most female deities with the exception of Jagaddhatri, Parvati, Annapurna, Durga, Kali, or Manasa. Even when Parvati or Annapurna are shown together with Shiva in the Kalighat *pats*, the former are most often shown with a halo but the latter invariably without. The only clay image with a halo that I have encountered is of Durga, but in that case the halo was merely painted on a wide back wall against which the moulded figure of the goddess in relief rests. It is likely that the halo was generally avoided in clay figures because a comparatively thin flat disc which would form the halo, to be loosely appended to the figure, would be vulnerable to breakage whereas the rest of the figure, because of its broad round mass, would hold together much better. Possibly this feature of the clay and terracotta figures that were painted by the *patuas* has persisted in Kalighat painting through sheer habit. Even if we were to ignore the causal part of the argument, i.e. the clay figure maker's constraint determining the painter's style, in the context this synchronous occurrence, by itself, assumes vital significance.

This long practice and experience of the *patuas* of painting round, three-dimensional clay figures played a definite role in shaping the character of their style of painting figures on the flat surface of paper. As the painters switched from painting on clay figures to painting on paper, the experience and memory of handling the fulsome, round forms of clay figures persisted in their curvaceous delineation, and indeed became a powerful tool in caricaturing the contemporary life of the period. 'This technique was extremely evocative in the satirical treatment of contemporary characters like the dandy, the prostitute, the impostor priest. Their bloated limbs and faces conveyed the impression of the hollowness of their society.'[20] One of the aptest examples of this use of the technique would be Fig. 8, where a 'fake sadhu' is being beaten up by a housewife. It almost literally illustrates Kaliprasanna Sinha's description of a religious hypocrite as he appears in one of the *swang* pantomime shows of the nineteenth century: 'his body was roly-poly like a cobbler's dog ... his belly round like a tomato ... the pigtail on his shaven head tied in a tuft'.[21]

The various sub-styles that formed the latter-day Kalighat painting were marked, among others, by at least two definite characteristics, namely exaggerated rotundity of faces and limbs achieved through tensed curves, and use of isolated single images or a unified composition of 2–3 of them forming a cut-out or tableau (in contrast to the dioramic pictorial narrative of *patua* scrolls with a busy background). These features clearly appear to owe their origin to the

Fig. 8
Woman Beating an Ascetic
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 83

Charlatans and hypocrites impersonating ascetics have been known in all ages. They thrive on the vulnerability of the superstitious. Besides the much publicised Tarakeshwar affair, religious places in Bengal have often been ill-famed for sundry scandals.

Roly-poly conmen impersonating sadhus have been regularly lampooned by the Kalighat artist, as is the case in this painting.

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 9 (*see* page 203)
Kartika
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 12

The image of Kartika in the minds of Bengal has always been that of a dandy. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Kartika began to 'learn the manners of modern times', adopting chic *dhoti*s, the Prince Albert hairstyle, and buckled European shoes.

Interestingly, a remarkable affinity is noticeable between the Kalighat *pat*s and the painted clay images of the deity (*Fig.* 10), which bespeaks the historical interrelationship of the dual artistic practices of the *patua*s in painted clay figure making and in painting *pat*s.

*patua*s' routine occupation of painting three-dimensional images. It must however be mentioned here that the *patua*s were essentially painters and not modellers, and as such, the clay figures made and painted by them were predominantly in the idiom of the painter's art, as their 'modelling failed to promote significant forms'.[22] The *patua*-made and painted figures were marked by 'a projection of the two-dimensional surface treatment in which qualities of pictorial art are displayed to the full, for example, in the flowing lines of drapery figures in sophisticated pictorial conventions ...'.[23] It is natural that in such a dual practice, the elements of painting three-dimensional clay figures and those of painting *pat*s got mixed up and came simultaneously into play only to bring about a unique artistic mode of expression.

The clay images already had a clear moulding of facial features, limbs, and clothing, including the folds of drapery. As the potter–painters or the *patua* painters painted these images, there was no need for them to concentrate on conceptualising the basic figure or to defining its preliminary spaces and outlines but could work on ready-made models, and as such could afford to work with rapid sweeps of the brush to fill in the details. This freedom from any concern in having first to define the basic form (which had already been done) gave the painters immense confidence in working at a speed that determined the unfaltering character of their line. For the painters, as they painted on paper, the ready-made pencil drawing executed by a master artist served as an equivalent of the ready-made terracotta of the potter, over which he drew with an equally bold brush. At some stage the potters had begun to use moulds to enable them to rapidly churn out images to inexpensively cater to the increasing demand of clients at temple bazaars and *mela*s. The two-dimensional *patua* counterpart of this was a lithographic outline of figures introduced to enable rapid production of pictures over which they painted with great confidence. All this led to stereotyped production, but it should not be forgotten that powerful and confident movement of line in the arts is the result of endless 'rehearsal' that has deserved admiration as the technical and aesthetic achievement of the artist. Indeed, the energy of these crisp sweeps was so forceful and original that they frequently did not match the basic contours of the terracotta figures or the pencil or litho outlines. The painters consciously bypassed these temporary sketches to achieve unmediated expressions of the desired form. Had they attempted to literally adhere to the moulded contours of the clay images or the pencil or lithographic outlines, their drawing would have faltered, as is the case with some present-day 'craftsmen' seeking to copy exactly 'Kalighat' paintings from W.G. Archer's books.

It may be appropriate here to cite a few examples of painted terracotta figures and Kalighat *pat*s that have explicit thematic and formal correspondence with each other to further underline the reciprocity of the two arts. Whereas Kalighat *pat*s are available aplenty for any comparative study, there is an acute shortage of collections of painted terracotta figures of the same genre. Because of their ephemeral nature the terracottas have scarcely been collected by

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museums or private collectors. A few examples are however to be found in the Ashutosh Museum, Calcutta, and the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. In spite of this scarcity of comparative material, whatever little that is available should just be sufficient to convince a viewer that the two artistic practices were not only intrinsically interconnected but manifestly influenced each other's idiom.

Let us compare the image of Kartika as found in a Kalighat *pat* (Fig. 9) with a painted terracotta idol of the deity (Fig. 10). The similarity of the mannerisms and characteristic features of the two types is astonishing: the depiction of the peacock with its head turned to the left; the posture of Kartika's hands, his small moustache, his way of draping the shawl, the long hanging curly hair, his European-style heeled shoes, and the way in which the fanned tail of the peacock forms a halo around the deity.

Equally, remarkable unity of conception is evoked if we compare the Kalighat *pats* of Balarama–Krishna (Fig. 11) with their terracotta counterparts (Fig. 12). The synchronicity is more than evident: both deities' symmetrical manner of standing cross-legged, their bodies tilting in opposite directions; the colour of Krishna's body; Krishna's lower garment being yellow (his epithet being *pitambara*); the posture of Balarama holding a drinking-horn and Krishna a flute; Krishna's wrist ornaments, Balarama's hand stretched behind Krishna's back, the shape and placement of the sacred forehead-marks on both the deities, and, above all, the composition of the two figures standing under a tree.

Fig. 10

Fig. 10
Kartika
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 18 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 4 / 98

See caption to *Fig.* 9

It is well-known that shading is practised when painting on a flat surface to indicate the third dimension, but the same treatment is generally not required in three-dimensional objects where shadows appear on their own as light falls on them. As we have seen earlier, the Kalighat painter did not so much attempt to shade as to intensify mass through emphatic coloration of certain areas. It is likely that this stereotype used for painting clay images persisted in painting on paper. A comparison between the figure of a cow in a Kalighat *pat* (Fig. 13) and a painted clay figure of a bull (Fig. 14) will testify to this. The body, the shape of limbs, and folds of the cow's skin are given a sense of rotundity by means of graduated sweeps of blue, a technique followed in painting clay figures that can be found in the treatment of the clay bull reproduced here.

Another palpable collation of pictorial style and conceptualisation of image between a Kalighat *pat* and a painted terracotta of the same region is provided by the *pat* of Ganga riding a

Fig. 11
Krishna and Balarama
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 10

The characteristic figuration and composition depicts a *jugal* or couple in the Kalighat genre, in which one figure is the mirror image of the other.

The *patua* painters were deeply rooted in the practice of fashioning and painting clay images of deities. *Fig.* 12 shows one such image indicating the reciprocity of mutual influences of the dual practices of the artists.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 11

Fig. 12
Krishna and Balarama
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 23 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 4 / 97 (1)

See caption to *Fig.* 11.

Fig. 13
Krishna Milking a Cow
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 150

The graded tones of blue watercolour on the figure of the cow compare well with the graded tones of pink on the painted clay figure of a bull from Bengal (*Fig.* 14), and once again confirm that these tones were meant to emphasise volume rather than chiaroscuro. Had it not been so, why would the artist shade a three-dimensional object like a clay bull?

Fig. 14
Bull
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 9 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 4/175(1)

See caption to *Fig.* 13.

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

crocodile (Fig. 15 and 16) and a terracotta crocodile (Fig. 17). The similarities between the two crocodiles: an elephant trunk-like extended element forming the upper lip, short cusp-like lower lip, the suggestion of a wiry moustache, a fish-like torso with prominent scales that ends in a forked fishtail, combined with the general conception of the image, speak of a common artistic heritage.

Fig. 14

A cursory look at several other painted terracotta figures of Bengal in conjunction with some of the Kalighat *pats* may be equally illuminating. Compare, for instance, the image of the goddess Shashthi in terracotta (Fig. 18) with the corresponding *pat* (Fig. 19), of Shiva carrying Sati's corpse in terracotta (Fig. 20) and the *pat* (Fig. 21) of Ganesha–Janani in terracotta (Fig. 22) with the *pat* (Fig. 23), and of a cat with a fish in its mouth in terracotta (Fig. 24) with the *pat* (Fig. 25).

The scroll painters usually filled in the background spaces with trees, ponds, rivers, or houses while the Kalighat painters left the background bare—a feature that may have to do with the

Fig. 15
Ganga
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 163

In its essential pictorial form, the image of Ganga here does not differ from that of Manasa (*Fig.* 90) or Lakshmi (*Fig.* 92). However, the delineation of her crocodile vehicle has remarkable affinity with the painted clay figure of the creature (*Fig.* 17) as well as with that depicted on the label of a cloth bale from Manchester (*Fig.* 32).

Fig. 16
Ganga
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 41

This painting depicting Ganga as a four-armed goddess seated on her crocodile vehicle differs from most Kalighat paintings in its yellow background and the spread of blue water from border to border.

The painting is particularly remarkable in its evocation of strong references to painted clay figures of crocodiles (*Fig.* 17) fashioned by *patuas* and *kumors*, and to oleographic labels pasted on bales of cloth exported to India from Manchester in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (*Fig.* 32).

Fig. 17
Crocodile
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 8 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum 4/160

Fig. 18
Shashthi
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 24 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 7 / 3946

See caption to *Fig.* 19.

Fig. 15

Fig. 19
Goddess Shashthi Standing on a Cat
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.574-1950
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

In terms of the thematic and pictorial conceptualisation, this painting is quite similar to the painted clay image (*Fig.* 18) of the deity fashioned by the *kumors* or the *patuas*.

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 20
Shiva Carrying Sati on his Shoulders
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay; 22 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 4 / 96 (1)

The general conception of the form and iconography of this clay figure closely corresponds to the Kalighat paintings in *Fig.* 21, hinting at an interrelationhip between the two artistic practices.

The theme relates to Shiva carrying away Sati on his shoulders, from her father Daksha's fire sacrifice. Unable to bear Shiva's humiliation by Daksha, she jumped into the sacrificial fire and died.

Fig. 21
Shiva carrying Sati away
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 12.

See caption to *Fig.* 20.

Fig. 22
Ganesha Janani
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 23 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum, 4 / 69

See caption to *Fig.* 23.

Fig. 23
Ganesha Janani
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 38

Parvati, Ganesha's mother, holds the infant lovingly on her lap, her gaze fixed on the onlooker. The painting appears to bear a remarkable resemblance to its painted clay figure counterpart (*Fig.* 22) in terms of figuration, composition, and the postures of the mother and child.

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

Fig. 25

Fig. 24
Cat with a Fish in its Mouth
Kalighat figure
early or mid-20th century.
Painted clay, 19 cm high
Collection: Crafts Museum
23 / 134 (13)

See caption to Fig. 25.

Fig. 25 (*see* page 204)
Cat Eating a Prawn
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 31

This amateurish painting depicting a cat eating a prawn is often interpreted as the representation of a fake monk who, despite renouncing the world, has been unable to control his lust.

There is a striking similarity between Kalighat paintings of this type and painted clay figures fashioned by *patua*s and *kumor*s (Fig. 24).

tableauesque construction of the terracotta figures made or painted by them.

A question that may however be asked is why, if the *patua*'s practice in clay modelling influenced the making of the Kalighat *pat*s, did the same practice not influence scroll painting? My answer to this is that the Kalighat *pat*s, like the clay figures, depicted isolated images that were not a part of a continuous narrative as in scroll painting, which would therefore require detailed background to set a stage for the story. Moreover, like the clay figures, Kalighat *pat*s were meant to be sold as cultic images to pilgrims which was not the case with scroll painting. Due to similarities in the purpose and practice of both the arts by the *patua*s, it was natural that the Kalighat *pat*s rather than the scrolls that were greatly influenced by the *patua*'s practice in clay modelling.

In this context, it would be relevant to discuss the question of the antiquity of the correlative practices of the *patua* painters and *kumor* potters who are engaged in making and painting clay images of deities, as well as the *patua*s working for *kumor*s to paint images made by them. Although, because of the general lack of dated information about this complementary professional relationship between the two groups of artists, it may be difficult to provide concrete evidence of its existence prior to the eighteenth century, there is no dearth of inferential evidence to establish it at least from the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. It can be said with certainty that a large number of potters of Kumortuli in north Calcutta, who have been the makers of painted clay images of gods and goddesses for a long time, came there to settle in the second half

of the eighteenth century. Most of these potters came from Nabadwip, Krishnanagar, Shantipur, and Meturi in Nadia district.[24] These potters and clay modellers, besides making sacred images of deities, prepared characters for *swang* or pantomime, especially caricaturing urban dwellers, during Chadak festival in the nineteenth century.[25] It is noteworthy that in the same period urban dwellers were satirised in Kalighat painting. It has been further recorded that scenes from daily life, statues of athletes and other celebrities, caricatures, and figures exemplifying the current scandals of the time were made by the clay modellers. Likewise, the *patua*s too introduced these in their painting on cloth or paper.

The potters of Nadia district, particularly those of Krishnanagar, have been living in that region from about the beginning of the nineteenth century. The present-day potters of Krishnanagar trace back their tradition of clay modelling eight to ten generations. Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray of Nabadwip (1710–1782) is said to have played a pioneering role in encouraging large-scale image worship on religious festivals. One of his ancestors, Bhabananda, appears to have celebrated the first recorded Durga puja in or around 1606.[26] Before that, deities were worshipped at home with the installations of an earthen jar (*ghat*) and painted panel (*pat*) of deities. This mode is known as '*ghatay–patay puja*'. Religious sanction for image worship was granted by Maharaja Krishnachandra, who also introduced Jagaddhatri puja which is performed with great pomp to this day.[27]

It can be said with certitude that Maharaja Krishnachandra, who popularised the worship of clay images of deities, also brought clay modellers from Dacca and Natore and settled them in Ghurni, near Krishnanagar, situated in the proximity of the river Khory or Jalangi which was a fine source of clay needed for modelling.[28] Subsequently, large scale clay-image worship appears to have spread throughout Bengal.

What has been said above shows that the *kumor*s who came to Kumortuli in Calcutta from the various localities of today's Nadia district were familiar with the art of making clay images of deities before coming to Calcutta in the second half of the eighteenth century, and there must have been more such migrations in the nineteenth century. The clay images made by them must have been painted either by themselves or by the *patua*s. We have already seen that the potters and clay figure makers of Calcutta employed the services of the *patua*s for painting their clay images, and as such there was a direct occupational relationship between them which can be presumed to have flourished throughout the nineteenth century.

Some interviews of Midnapur *patua*s conducted in 1972 reveal that the combined practice of painting *pat*s and making and painting clay figures was in existence at the end of the nineteenth century and continued at least in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Rajni Chitrakar of Midnapur, who was born on 11 February 1892, was a highly successful artist patronised by landlords. In his incomplete autobiography of the 1970s, in the possession of his son Shrish

Fig. 26

Tableau of Durga, Mahishasuramardini
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 24

This incomplete painting is a faithful representation of the tableau of Durga, generally used as a cultic image in the Durga puja festival of Bengal.

With the increased inflow of pilgrims and tourists into Calcutta there was an increased demand for souvenirs. Paintings being easier to transport, several clay images of earlier times were now turned into paintings, of which this one is a typical example.

A comparison of this tableau with that constituting the climactic scene in a Purulia *chhau* performance (*Fig.* 27) illustrates the interdependence of imagery in a collective cultural context.

Fig. 26

Chitrakar, he reveals that Raja Jadavchandra Raichowdhuri, the rich landlord of Majnamutha, in Tamluk subdivision of Midnapur district, had granted landed property to his ancestors in Aqubpur village, which was under the *zamindari* of the landlord, on condition that they would henceforth make images of the goddess Durga for him.[29] Considering that Rajni Chitrakar was born in 1892, and that his ancestors were granted landed property for making Durga images, this would establish that this *patua* family of Midnapur was adept in making clay images at least in the first half of the nineteenth century. Since the landlord had gone to the extent of gifting landed property to the *patua*s to obtain their services for clay image making, they must already have excelled in the art at that time, which presumes

extensive past practice of the art. Shrish Chitrakar also refers to close family connections between Harijiban Pal, a famous potter of Kumortuli and Rajni Chitrakar that further underlines the close contacts that existed between these two professions.[30]

Fig. 27

Fig. 27
Tableau of Durga, Mahishasuramardini
Chhau performance from Purulia, West Bengal, contemporary.

See caption to Fig. 26

In the same interview, Prabirchandra Chitrakar (then aged 74) and Jnanendra Patidar (then aged 60), both Midnapur *patuas*, talk of their families' proficiency in clay doll and image making. Jnanendra Patidar, who was sixty years old in about 1970, talks of his father having been a very good doll and image maker.[31] Other *patuas* of Midnapur interviewed at that time include Khandu Chitrakar, Dhiren Chitrakar, and Paritosh Chitrakar, who also mention that their families practised clay figure making besides *pat* painting.[32] It is remarkable that a primary sample survey of the occupational patterns of the *patuas* of Kalighat conducted around 1970 showed that almost all of them have turned exclusively to making clay images.[33].

As mentioned earlier, T.N. Mukharji's published references to the *patuas*' combined practice of painting *pats* and making clay figures goes back to 1888.[34] The above sketch of the situation makes it amply clear that at least during the major part of the nineteenth century there was a close professional connection between the *patuas*' practice of painting scrolls and making clay images and their working together with the *kumors*, and that this practice had greatly contributed to determining the character of the Kalighat style which itself flourished during the same period.

The cultic images of gods and goddesses in the form of clay figures appear to possess the character of a tableau. The large Durga puja idols showing, in the centre, Durga astride her lion vehicle, piercing the trident into the body of the demon Mahishasura, flanked by her two sons Ganesh and Kartika, and complete with the *chalchitra* or painted arch shown in Fig. 26, comes very close to the climactic scenes of the *jatra* and *chhau* folk theatre performances relating to the theme of the goddess killing the demon. In Purulia *chhau* performances related to Durga and the demon, initially Ganesh roams around to discover the whereabouts of demons and returns to Durga with information. The demon arrives on the scene followed by the goddess's lion and then the goddess herself. There is a battle. The demon is killed. At this point all the participants get together and form a tableau that is immediately worshipped by the audience–devotees. The common image of Durga worshipped at the time of Durga puja in Bengal strongly resembles such a tableau

Fig. 28

Kali Trampling Upon Shiva
Chhau performance from northern West Bengal, contemporary.

At the end of the performance, Kali stands on Shiva forming the climactic tableau, which is then worshipped by the audience.

(Fig. 27) which is in turn reflected in Bengali paintings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In north Bengal, in a *jatra* theatrical performance, when Kali and a demon are engaged in a similar battle, Shiva appears on the scene, reclines at the feet of Kali who, in turn, while holding the annihilated demon in one hand, tramples upon Shiva to form a tableau which is then worshipped by the audience–devotees (Fig. 28). Many a Kalighat *pat* (Fig. 29) and clay image of Kali trampling upon Shiva evokes a strong sense of the close conceptual and visual similarities between the theatrical tableaux and the painted and moulded cultic images.

The earlier small painted clay images of Shiva, Shiva and Parvati, Shiva and Annapurna, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Shashthi, Radha–Krishna, Krishna–Balarama, etc., too have a tableauesque look about them, and this aspect of these images has clearly percolated down to Kalighat painting. However, the possibility of the tableau having directly influenced Kalighat painting is not denied here. Their frontal postures, their gaze directed at the devotees, their construction as single unified cultic images comprising one or more deities, and the total absence of any background combined with the peculiar stylisation that arose from the *patua*'s habit of painting three-dimensional images, at once make a number of Kalighat paintings appear to be direct offshoots of the painted clay figures, which in turn owed a degree of their genesis to the climactic scenes of the folk theatre mentioned above.

It is a confirmed fact that painted clay dolls, religious images, *saras*, and Kalighat type *pats* were sold together by the same establishments. Though the Kalighat temple area was not the only place where they were concentrated, it was certainly the most important market place for them. Several early twentieth century accounts of eyewitnesses testify to this. Apparently, the practice of selling religious paintings in conjunction with clay figures in the vicinity of the Kalighat temple continued to exist, presumably on the earlier pattern, right up to the 1950s as a 'highly mercenary trade in coloured pictures and plaster statuettes of the divinities' was then observed by Claude Levi-Strauss.[35] It is assumed that such a trade already existed in the early nineteenth century. The new temple of Kalighat was built in 1809, and soon after that clusters of shops sprang up to trade in pilgrims' souvenirs such as clay figures and, as W.G. Archer pointed out, 'it was this trade which came to include watercolour paintings in the early nineteenth century'.[36] On account of

Fig. 29

Fig. 29
Kali Trampling Upon Shiva
Kalighat painting, 1854–5.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 4527

The iconography may have had its origin in the ritualistic theatrical tableau of northern West Bengal (*see* caption to *Fig.* 28).

the importance of the Kalighat temple as a place of Hindu pilgrimage, there has always been a great influx of pilgrims in the vicinity of the temple .The *patua* scroll painters appear to have migrated to Kalighat to make and sell paintings, icons, and coloured toys which were bought by pilgrims as auspicious souvenirs.[37] The renowned painters Nibaran Chandra Ghose (c. 1835–1930) and Kali Charan Ghose (c. 1844–1930) are known to have had their stalls on Nakuleshwartala, by the side of the Kalighat temple.[38] The descendants of the *patua*s of much earlier times are still to be found living around Parvati Chakravarti Lane.[39]

Drawn by the potential for brisk business in painted clay figures and *pat*s in Calcutta, hundreds of families of *patua*s and *kumor*s

migrated to the city in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Patuatola of central Calcutta, Patuapara of Kalighat, and Kumortuli[40] are some of the remnants of this phenomenon. Apart from the Kalighat temple area, Chitpur was a major place of pilgrimage in northern Calcutta. Centred around the temple of Chitteshwari founded in 1610, Chitpur once boasted of a flourishing colony of artists (*chitrakaras*) who apparently fled to settle in Kalighat on account of an increasing threat from robbers in that area.[41] A division of Chitpur was Kumortuli where the potters fashioned the clay from the river beside their homes and gradually took to fashioning images of gods and goddesses worshipped in the mansions all around, and subsequently for community pujas in the city.[42] It is not surprising that babus, bibis, courtesans and their lovers figure so prominently in Kalighat painting, because Chitpur, which had housed a colony of artists (who later fled to Kalighat), was also the hub of the legendary babu of the nineteenth century Calcutta. 'The *phool-babu* would emerge in the evening, his parted hair shining with pomade, pleated *dhoti* end in one hand and silver-topped ebony cane in the other, chewing a fragrant *khili* of *paan* on his way to his paramour. Sonagacchi continues to be the city's most celebrated red-light district.'[43]

It is common knowledge that *pats* as well as *saras* and painted clay dolls and religious figures were sold around the various temples all over Bengal and Bihar (Fig. 30) as much as in the city of Calcutta. Fairs and special bazaars where these were sold were held on such festive occasions as Dolejatra (Holi), Durga puja, Kali puja, Sarasvati puja, Jagaddhatri puja, Shivaratri, Rash jatra, Janmashtami, Chaitra and Paush *samkrantis*, Chadak festival, etc.: traders from east Bengal would flock to Calcutta during the months of August and September, before Durga puja festival and procure huge supplies of *pats* of deities such as Durga, Kartika, Ganesh, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, etc., Muslim pyrotechnicians would carry these about and display them at marriage festivals where they would be invited to demonstrate their skills.[44]

Not only did the concurrent practices of making and/or painting terracotta figures and producing painted *pats* mutually influence the two media, but their concurrent marketing to pilgrim–tourists in the bazaars around temples and at various annual fairs also enhanced such mutual impact and thereby contributed towards the development of certain stylistic features of these paintings.

The introduction of railways brought in more and more pilgrim–tourists to Calcutta. Their demand for souvenirs in combination with the increased availability of paper and watercolours began to tilt the balance in favour of easily portable painted *pats* as against fragile and breakable terracottas. Between 1854 and 1871, which also happens to be the peak period of Kalighat painting, Calcutta (Howrah) got connected with the national railway network linking it, among others, with Varanasi, Allahabad, Patna, Bombay, and Agra. Several smaller lines connected Calcutta with its suburbs and farther areas of Bengal. The result was a multifold increase in the flow of pilgrims, tourists, and traders to and from Calcutta. This led to an immense spurt in the souvenir trade in and around the major

Fig. 30

Fig. 30
Stall for Sale of Painted Clay Images
Company school, Patna, c 1860.
Collection: BM, 1948. 100-9. 0156, 'Given by P.C. Manuk and Miss G. M. Coles, through the National Art Collections Fund' 'Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum'

The clay images displayed for sale are those of Kali trampling upon Shiva, Durga killing the demon Mahisha, Rama, Hanuman, a water-carrier, a man smoking a hookah, etc. Stalls similar to this one, selling religious icons to pilgrims might have been set up at fairs and in the environs of the Kalighat temple.

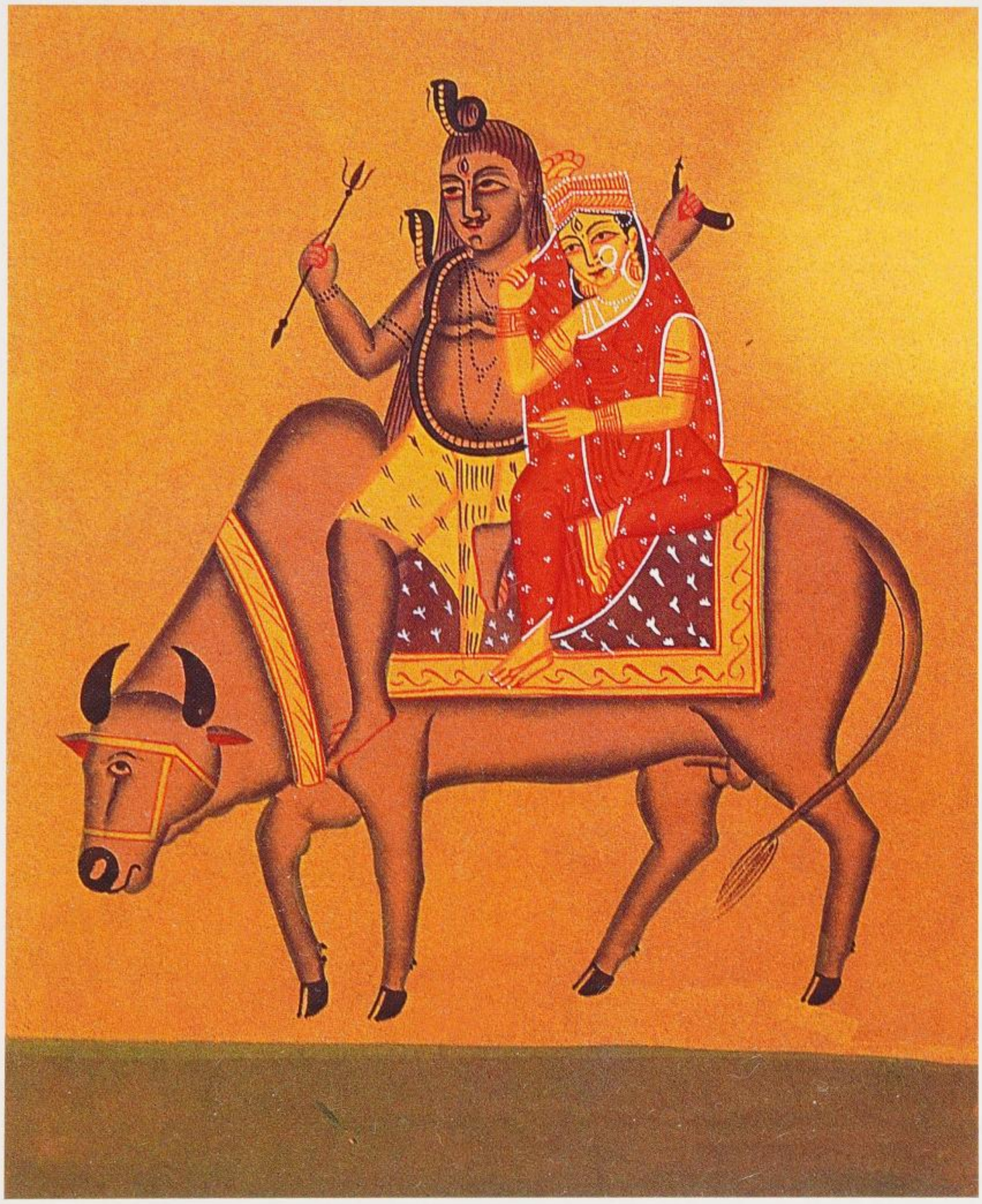

Fig. 31

Fig. 31
Shiva and Parvati on Nandi
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 28 x 23 cm
Private collection

Dozens of Kalighat paintings of a similar type have come from the *haveli*s of Shekhavati whose owners had business establishments in Calcutta in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig. 32
Ganga
Label pasted on a bale of cloth imported into India from Manchester.
late 19th century or early 20th century.
Oleograph, 13 x 10 cm
Collection: Jutta Jain-Neubauer

See caption to *Fig.* 15.

Fig. 33
Annapurna
A print from a Calcutta art studio, early 20th century.
Lithograph, 37 x 25 cm
Private collection

Loads of lithographs produced by the art studios of Calcutta, along with dozens of Kalighat paintings, have come from the *havelis* of Shekhavati in Rajasthan, confirming that religious pictures from Calcutta, in all probability from Kalighat, were brought home by pilgrim–tourists from far and afield.

The pictorial conception here bespeaks of a descent from the Kalighat idiom.

pilgrimage sites of Calcutta, especially Kalighat. As the pilgrim–tourists began to pour into Calcutta from distant places, they needed to carry home souvenirs. Given their bulkiness and fragility, it was not convenient for them to carry clay figures, and that is why they preferred buying paintings, which were, in a way, two-dimensional versions of the cultic terracotta figures.[45]

Some evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the fact that a number of Kalighat type *pats* have come lately from the palatial mansions, known as *havelis*, of the rich Marwari families of the Shekhavati region of Rajasthan. Members of a majority of these families had lived in Calcutta right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, either working as banians for the British firms or subsequently running their own trading houses or industry. While having their occupations and business establishments in Calcutta, the Marwari families built palatial mansions in their home towns in Shekhavati which they visited in summer and during the Diwali vacations. The walls of these *havelis* were studded with framed Kalighat *pats* as well as European and Calcutta oleographs and prints that the banians had brought home from Calcutta as souvenirs.

The interior and exterior walls of these *havelis* were densely painted with imagery that was rooted, on the one hand, in the Rajasthani traditions of mural and miniature painting, and, on the other, influenced by the contemporary lifestyle and ethos of painting in the Calcutta of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Calcutta-based owners of these *havelis* brought with them, in their periodic visits to their country homes, dozens of Kalighat *pats* (Fig. 31),

Fig. 34

Fig. 35

Fig. 34 (*see* page 205)
Mahant of Tarakeshwar or B*hishti* (Water-Carrier)
Kalighat painting
last quarter of 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 7

Though often described as a *bhishti*, or water-carrier, the image in all probability represents the Mahant of Tarakeshwar, serving his term of rigorous imprisonment. Sacred marks on his forehead and his arms, together with his beard, moustache, and long hair, characteristic features of his portrayal in other paintings, confirm that identity. (For details of the Tarakeshwar affair *see* Chapter 3).

The Tamil inscription on the painting indicates that in the nineteenth century pilgrims from distant places were accustomed to taking home souvenirs from the Kalighat shrine.

It is possible to place the entire series bearing Tamil inscriptions in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, because of the presence of a few pictures illustrating the Tarakeshwar affair which took place in 1873.

Fig. 35 (*see* page 206)
Reconciliation of Elokeshi and Nabin
Kalighat painting
last quarter of 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 8

The painting is cast in the mould of several such depictions of a Bengali babu in dalliance with his mistress, a popular motif in later Kalighat painting.

It is most likely that the painting depicts a reconciliation of Elokeshi and Nabin (for details of the Tarakeshwar affair involving the murder of Elokeshi by Nabin *see* Chapter 3).

For a basis of dating *see* caption to Fig. 34.

Fig. 36 (*Following pages*)
Nabin Kills Elokeshi
Kalighat painting
last quarter of 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 9

The painting illustrates an episode from the Tarakeshwar affair involving the murder of Elokeshi by her husband Nabin. (For details of the Tarakeshwar affair *see* Chapter 3). The affair took place in 1873 which makes it possible to date the painting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Also *see* caption to Fig. 34.

Fig. 37 (*Following pages*)
Prawn and Fish
Kalighat painting
last quarter of 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 13

Far from the conventions of British natural history drawings, the prawn and fish depicted here appear to be pictorial counterparts of three-dimensional painted clay figures of the creatures sold at *melas* and in the bazaars around the Kalighat temple during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For dating and popularity of Kalighat painting as far as the Tamil country, *see* caption to Fig. 34.

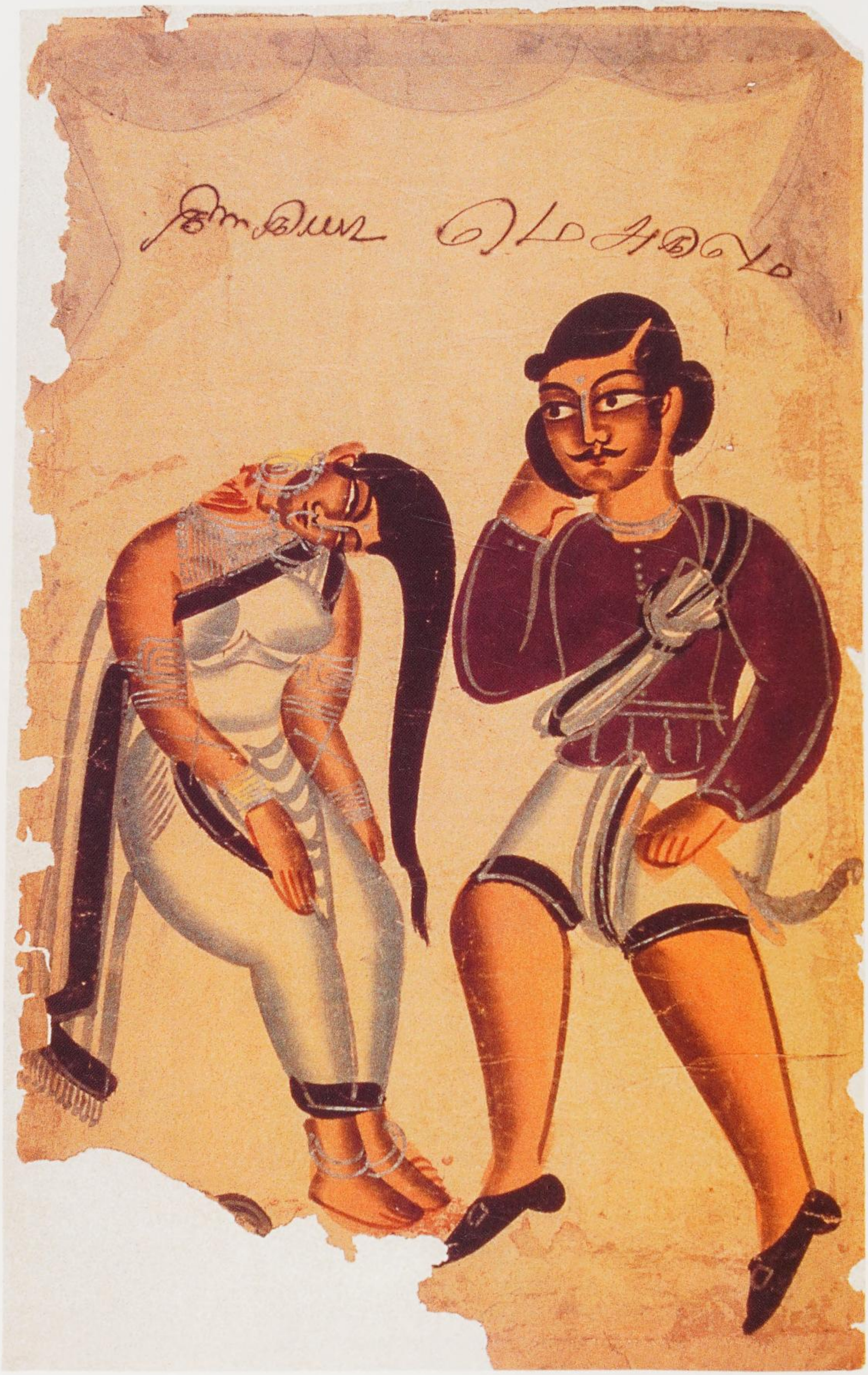

Fig. 36

Fig. 37

Fig. 38

Fig. 38
Babu and his Mistress
Kalighat painting
last quarter of the 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 82

A woman offering a *paan* to or enjoying one in the company of a man was considered an erotic gesture in nineteenth century Bengal. Here the woman, shown seated next to shelves stacked with *paan*, could be a courtesan entertaining a customer.

The Tamil inscription on top speaks of the popularity of Kalighat souvenirs as far as the Tamil country. For a basis of dating *see* caption to *Fig.* 34.

lithographs, oleographs, oleographic cloth bale labels from Manchester (Fig. 32), prints from Calcutta art studios (Fig. 33), etc.[46] The imagery and idiom of these wall paintings of Shekhavati are partially derived from these paintings and prints. Apart from the images of colonial British style buildings: portraits of sahibs and memsahibs; railway trains, steamers, motor-cars and carriages; gramophones and rifle-wielding soldiers, clear traces of attempts at 'shading' in the manner of European prints and drawing with contours intended to give exaggerated volume to forms, as found in Kalighat painting, can be seen in abundance in these murals. In several instances it has been possible to establish a one-to-one identification of a popular Calcutta print with a painted panel.[47]

Further evidence of the popularity of Kalighat *pat*s as souvenirs outside Bengal can be found in a whole series of paintings in the collection of Davida and Chester Herwitz. Each painting of this series has an inscription in Tamil, indicating that it was brought to the Tamil country from Calcutta by a pilgrim or a tourist from there (see Fig. 34, 35, 36, 37, and 38).[48]

Kalighat paintings appear to have appealed to many foreigners who visited India in the nineteenth century. This popularity was apparently on account of their value as oriental souvenirs and objects of curiosity brought home to amuse their families and friends with the images of Indian gods and goddesses with many arms and heads. These 'exotic' pictures must certainly have served as great conversation pieces. The formidable nature of such collections, often with brief inscriptions detailing in roman script the names of deities or the general theme, to have been made in the UK, Czechoslovakia, and Russia in the nineteenth century makes it evident that the Kalighat painters had a large foreign market in addition to the Indian one.

Christian missionaries had a special theological interest in the mythology of Hindu gods and goddesses. Prior to the availability of printed pictures, only the Kalighat paintings offered a whole range of images of Hindu deities that could be carried home easily. Thomas Macbeth, son of Rob Macbeth, Vicar of Marton, collected 90 Hindu mythological paintings in 1856 and wrote detailed notes on their iconography. These, together with Macbeth's original handwritten

notes are now in the collection of Chester and Davida Herwitz. A Baptist missionary couple from Britain, Edward Bean and Emily Underhill, who were in Calcutta between 1854–5, brought home 26 Kalighat paintings and 36 Calcutta woodblock prints which are now in the India Office Library, London.

Another set of 48 paintings in the collection of the India Office Library, belonging to two different series, was also collected in the nineteenth century, and of those 17 paintings definitely came to England in 1870–1.[49] The majority of paintings in the India Office Library collection are those that went to London as a part of the London International Exhibition of 1871.[50] Between the eighteen-sixties and -seventies, Sir M. Monier–Williams collected a number of Kalighat paintings in Calcutta and brought them to Britain, and those are now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.[51] The Victoria and Albert Museum has a collection of about 650 Kalighat paintings, including a number collected by J. Lockwood Kipling in the nineteenth century. Between 1874–8, 26 Kalighat paintings were brought to Czechoslovakia, and those are now in the collection of Naprstek Museum, Prague.[52] A certain Dimitry Alexandrovich Rovinsky bought 62 paintings in Calcutta in 1874, and those are now in the Pushkin Museum of Graphic Arts, Moscow.[53]

It is agreed by most scholars that Kalighat *pat*s were among the most favourite mementoes carried home by pilgrims, visitors, traders, and tourists who came to Calcutta from within and outside Bengal in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though the areas surrounding the Kalighat temple may have been the largest production centre of and market for these *pat*s, it appears that they were also sold at less popular temple sites and at weekly bazaars and annual festival *mela*s organised in several other localities of the city. The overall period of Kalighat painting corresponds with the revolutionary changes that occurred in the spheres of transport and communication, leading to a significant rise in traffic to and from Calcutta, and had a significant impact on the scale of production and circulation of these paintings. The introduction of the railway in 1854, as mentioned earlier, and its subsequent spread connecting Calcutta via Howrah with other parts of Bengal as well as with Varanasi, Allahabad, Agra, Delhi, and Bombay by 1870; improvement of the public transport system within Calcutta: starting with horse-drawn tramways in 1873 to steam-powered tracers that plied between Chowringhee Road and Kalighat in 1882, and the system's electrification in 1902, linking the Esplanade with Kalighat; improvement of shipping through introduction of ships with iron hulls and steam engines from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (see Fig. 39); macadamisation of the major streets of Calcutta from the 1840s onwards, and the gradual introduction of telecommunication and public distribution of electricity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, caused a tremendous rise in the migrant population of Calcutta. The need to cater to this new influx of pilgrims, tourists, and traders in the city, among other factors, possibly led to a quick churning out of Kalighat-type *pat*s in which, as some scholars believe, the speed of execution became an important determinant of style; a

Fig. 39

Fig. 39
Sahib and Memsahib on a Paddle-Wheel Boat
Coloured woodcut, Calcutta
19th century.
Collection: Herwitz, G 11

It has been recorded that by 1861–2 as many as 89 steam vessels had visited Calcutta port (S. Bhattacharya, 1990). It is likely that small luxury cruisers, one depicted here, were owned by some British traders. The possibility of the engraver having imitated a European painting cannot however be overlooked.

theory that I shall discuss in a later chapter. Lured by the large market potential for souvenirs offered by this massive influx of largely transitory visitors, *patuas* flocked to the city, especially around the Kalighat temple and other places of importance where a lucrative market awaited them. According to an eyewitness, Kalighat *pats* were sold at least up to the 1920s at Kalighat, Paharpur, and Tollygunge in Calcutta; at Maheshballavpore and Ramrajtala in Howrah, and at Nawabganj and Kanchrapara in 24 Parganas.[54]

The *Patua* Scroll Painters and Kalighat Painting

Though the *patuas* fashioned painted clay dolls and sacred figures, there is no doubt that before moving to Calcutta they were essentially painters of narrative scrolls depicting the legends of Rama, Krishna, Durga, Manasa, Chand Sadagar, Behula and Lakhindar, Hara–Parvati, Nemai, Gazi, etc. The *patuas* also travelled from village to village narrating stories with the aid of their painted scrolls.

It is certain that although artisans belonging to several communities other than that of *patuas*, such as *sutradhars*, *bhaskars* and *kumors*, contributed in the practice and formation of the so-called Kalighat genre, it was the *patuas* who played a determining role in its genesis. Let us therefore examine their social and professional background and the essential features of their artistic mode which may have had an impact on their subsequent practice of Kalighat *pat* painting.

The peculiarly eclectic social and religious position of the

*patua*s of Bengal needs to be briefly discussed here. The *patua*s follow part Hindu and part Muslim customs. Though their marriage (*nikah*) rites are performed by Muslim *kazi*s, they hold Islamic and Hindu names, observe Hindu and Islamic rituals and festivals, and their women, like the Hindu women of Bengal, wear conch bangles and daub vermilion powder over the central parting of their hair to signify that their husbands are alive. Both as illustrators and narrators of Hindu legends, they are well-versed in regional Hindu mythology, rituals, and festivals. As noted earlier, according to one of the legends of the *patua*s, they became adherents of Islam on account of Mahadev's curse but were able to retain a connection with Hindu practices because the curse was modified. It is however imperative to note that they remained authorised makers of idols for worship by Hindus. There have been several occasions in the past when the *patua*s sought to Hinduise themselves in attempts at upward social mobility. This did not succeed because upper caste Hindus refused to accept them into their fold.[55] The community is currently divided into two groups, i.e. Muslims and Hindus. The former follow a combination of Muslim and Hindu customs whereas the latter have lower caste Hindu status. The *patua*s who settled in Calcutta, especially in the vicinity of Kalighat, are Hindus[56] while those living in remoter rural areas are part Muslim.

Though traditionally the families of scroll painters were found in the areas of Hooghly, Howrah, 24 Parganas, Midnapur, Birbhum, Murshidabad, and Burdwan, the majority of those who settled in Calcutta (Patuapara and Patuatola) appear to have come from the south-western Bengal group,[57] i.e. Midnapur, around the beginning of the nineteenth century. One reason why the Kalighat painters are primarily known as *patua*s is because a majority of them have come from Midnapur where they are known by this nomenclature. In Bankura and Purulia they were better known as *patidar* and in Birbhum as *chitrakar*.[58]

According to one account, the *patua*s of Bengal were organised into several endogamous social circles known as *samaj bandhini*s, each comprising a certain number of families living in a certain geographic area. Interestingly, not only were marriages generally organised within these circles but *gharwana* qualities ('trade secrets') or characteristic features of the 'traditional and regional school of painting' peculiar to particular *samaj bandhini*s were preserved within them.[59] It is said that the Kalighat painters, who attained great commercial success in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and who had belonged to the *charpara* sub-circle of the larger *baropara* circle, 'had monopolised their new experimental successes so completely that they moved away from the other *samajik* schools [social circles] of Bengal, as a result of which this famous secular school almost died in *situ*'.[60]

Although, on account of the lack of any database that can lead to a definitive conclusion about the existence of such *samaj bandhini*-bound styles of *patua* painting, it may be difficult to wholly accept this theory, there is little doubt that each broad area such as Murshidabad, Birbhum, Burdwan, or Midnapur had its own characteristic stylistic features of painting. Since the so-called *samaj bandhini*s are supposed to have comprised a group of certain families, it is not unlikely that

certain family idioms had grown in each such socio-geographic circle to become its stylistic norm.

The migration of *patua* scroll painters to Calcutta and their settling down around Kalighat and other sites of the city brought about major changes in the artistic milieu. As scroll painters and picture showmen, the *patua*s followed an itinerant mode of life, moving from place to place, exhibiting to village audiences painted scrolls illustrating various legends and narrating them in prose and verse.

Despite the fact that the *patua*s of the various regions, such as Murshidabad, Birbhum, and Midnapur, often chose to paint the same story, more often than not the episode selected by them varied from area to area and sometimes from individual to individual. Moreover, one finds major differences in the format, coloration, figuration, and pictorial narrative techniques used by the *patua*s of particular regions. For example, the scrolls of Midnapur and Murshidabad are scarcely 50 to 70 cm wide whereas those from Birbhum are often about 90 cm in width. Despite the smaller width, the Murshidabad artists depicted elaborate landscape, a profusion of figures, heightened naturalism through the expressive postures and gestures of the figures, finer workmanship, and detailed patterning of clothing, furniture, etc. In contrast, smaller width has become a constraint for the Midnapur artist in whose scrolls several stiff looking figures appear in each register. The figures are generally flat, sketchily rendered with minimum treatment of form and usually lacking in expression. The Birbhum scrolls, with their large registers providing generous accommodation to each figure, against a bright red background, differ from those of Midnapur and Murshidabad in the liveliness of the figures portrayed which excel in exuding sentiments through facial expressions and bodily postures. Unlike the scrolls of Midnapur, their Birbhum counterparts truly complement the oral narrative through their impressive and powerful pictorial vocabulary.[61]

The *patua*s painted the scrolls in order to conduct picture shows and not with the primary objective of sale. The scenes depicted in these scrolls sequentially illustrated select episodes from a legend in a manner that would easily communicate the essential story punctuated by heartrending incidents, calculated to spellbind their audiences. Basic pictorial vocabulary was used as an indicator of the relevant scenery; for example a couple of columns , arches, and windows would suggest a palace, an undulating blue patch with a wavy pattern punctuated by the occasional fish would represent a river, or a few trees would symbolise a forest or landscape. Each *patua* followed his own convention to pictorialise a certain incident from a story, and often these led to the development of a regional style. Painted registers of these scrolls acted as a visual aid to the orally narrated story. The paintings were lent an additional dimension through the oral narration, and the latter was enriched by the pictorial illustrations. The scrolls were not meant to be complete or self-contained narrative entities. They attained fuller meaning only when complemented by verbal narration in the presence of their audiences.

This practice played a crucial role in determining the style and character of these scroll paintings.

The Kalighat *pat*s differed considerably from the *patua* scrolls in terms of objectives and functions, and therefore adopted a wholly different vocabulary and attributes. They were not meant for storytelling but were created as cultic paintings or souvenirs for sale. Each painting was complete in itself and was not a part of a sequential narrative.[62] If the scroll was meant to be a forward moving dioramic narrative comprising a series of painted episodes of a legend, the Kalighat *pat* was a static tableau, representing a single or compounded image. Not having any narrative function, as was the case in the scroll, these *pat*s were generally devoid of any background scenery to complement the narrative. They were either meant to be framed and hung on walls as cultic objects and fancy paintings, or to form part of albums carried home as souvenirs by tourists.

Before I discuss in greater detail some of the cultural resources of the time that might have shaped the peculiar style of Kalighat *pat*s and the salient features of the Kalighat idiom itself, it may be worth summarising the controversy regarding the European or indigenous origin of the 'style' to clarify certain apparent misunderstandings.

W.G. Archer's zealously argued standpoint[63] is that the style of Kalighat was actually a by-product of the British connection and can only be understood against that background. Opposed to it is B.N. Mukherjee's equally spirited position[64] that though the Kalighat painters 'could have been acquainted with paintings done by the Europeans ... but these could not have changed their basic technique and style which remained indigenous all throughout'. These correspond to two poles of a long-drawn out controversy as to whether the new mode of painting represented by the Kalighat *pat*s owed its origin to Western influence or developed from the indigenous practices of painting followed by the *patua*s much before the arrival of the British in Calcutta. In support of his argument, Archer enumerates such factors as the formidable presence of British paintings in Calcutta by the end of the eighteenth century and there being amateur artists amongst the European residents in Calcutta; the chief British medium being watercolour (as also of Kalighat *pat*s) as against the tempera conventionally used by the *patua*; commissioning of Indian artists by the local British aristocracy to paint studies of plants, animals, fish, and insects at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries; the import and use of machine-made paper cut to folio-size by the painters of Kalighat; every contour having been shaded in Kalighat *pat*s (a practice that was in sharp contrast to indigenous work and is European in origin) and the absence of any attempt to fill the space with flat washes of colour. B.N. Mukherjee,[65] on the other hand, traces the use of folio-sized sheets of paper, opaque watercolour (gouache), and blank backgrounds in two illustrated manuscripts of the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Ramacharitamanasa* of the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries respectively stemming from pre-British Bengal. Besides, he

does not subscribe to Archer's view that in Kalighat *pat*s 'every contour was shaded'[66] in the sense of producing an effect of light and shade but believes that the treatment is more to convey a sense of volume. Other factors, such as the Kalighat *patua*'s avoidance of mixing white pigments with other colours (in contrast with their earlier practice of *pat* painting) or bringing in contemporary social events as themes are explained by B.N. Mukherjee as circumstantial rather than of European origin.

It is unfortunate that the debate and controversy became highly charged, leading to tendentious arguments in favour or against European or indigenous origin of the Kalighat style. Besides other things, this scholarly preoccupation has considerably diverted the attention of the art historians from the essential characteristics of the paintings and the various artistic currents and processes that were actually operating in their making. First of all, let me clarify that though the *patua*s' practice of fashioning painted clay figures and painting storytellers' scrolls may have had a formidable role in determining the basic character of the Kalighat style, it should not be forgotten that no unilinear evolution of the Kalighat *pat*s can be easily traced from these traditions through the existing material evidence, as a majority of the surviving scrolls and figures date from the nineteenth century or later and therefore coincide with the central period of the Kalighat *pat*s. There are definite mutual influences from *patua* scrolls to Kalighat *pat*s and vice versa. It is unlikely that even those *patua*s who did not settle in Calcutta or did not paint Kalighat-type *pat*s but continued to paint and narrate scrolls in their own traditional environment, were unaware of their brethren doing lucrative business in Calcutta through a new form of work. As artists, the village *patua*s could not have remained wholly oblivious of or indifferent to this exciting new genre of painting. On the other hand, the *patua*s who settled at Kalighat and elsewhere in Calcutta had brought with them generations old inherited experience of fashioning painted clay figures and painting scrolls. This experience too was of vital importance in shaping the Kalighat idiom in Calcutta.

In general, in the absence of actual *patua* storytellers' scrolls predating the Kalighat *pat*s,[67] the only course left open to us is to analyse the common artistic features of the two genres and to understand where they coalesce or diverge from each other. Let us first take up the much disputed question of 'shading'. We have already seen that what is described as 'shading' by some scholars was not so in the real academic sense, and that by placing graded tones of colours in certain areas the artists were attempting to lend volume to forms, in all probability a practice arising out of their experience in modelling three-dimensional clay figures and painting them. The question of definition of 'shading' apart, it has been categorically said by W.G. Archer that every contour was shaded in Kalighat painting and that this stood in 'utter contrast to indigenous work'.[68] This statement does not stand the testimony of the actual evidence. Which 'indigenous work' is one talking about? If 'indigenous work' is meant to connote the *patua* tradition of scroll painting, it should be reiterated that there is very little dated evidence of the *patua* scrolls predating the 1820s: a

Fig. 40

period that would possibly mark the earliest beginning of the Kalighat genre. The only scrolls that are available from before this period are those from Murshidabad, dateable to c. 1800, which appear to share the least kinship with the Kalighat genre. Archer[69] talks of the style of the *patua* scrolls having none of the curving exuberance of the Kalighat paintings, and that in them 'shading is markedly absent'. He appears to presume the existence of such a tradition of scroll painting in the earlier period of which we have little evidence. The *patua*s of Birbhum and Midnapur are known to have had ancestral connections with those of Kalighat. No scroll paintings of those *patua*s predating the Kalighat *pat*s have come to light. In this case the argument that seeks to contrast 'shading' with (pre-existing) indigenous work does not hold. So far as the Birbhum and Midnapur scrolls are concerned, it must be stated that most of the earliest surviving ones appear to belong to the second half of the nineteenth century when the Kalighat idiom was at its peak. Among the Birbhum scrolls in the collection of Gurusaday Museum there are several that depict figures with distinct signs of 'shading'. Let us take two examples, i.e. the Ramayana scroll and Mahadeva's Shankhadan scroll.[70] In the former, the scene of Rama collapsing in the episode of the golden deer being killed and Lakshmana trying to hold him back (Fig. 40) and in that of Jatayu halting Ravana's chariot in which Sita was being abducted (Fig. 41), one

Fig. 40
Lakshmana Nursing Rama
Ramayana scroll, Birbhum
second half 19th century.
Pigment on paper (detail)
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 1627.

The detail underscores the fact that besides the Kalighat artists, the *patua* scroll painters too practised a form of vestigial shading.

Fig. 41

Fig. 41
Jatayu Obstructing Ravana's Chariot
Ramayana scroll, Birbhum
second half 19th century.
Pigment on paper (detail)
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 1627.

See caption to *Fig.* 40.

sees major attempts at shaping the limbs and moulding the muscles of the various characters: a feature also found in Kalighat *pat*s. Indeed, the conceptualisation of Jatayu here and in Kalighat *pat*s (Fig. 42) appear to be intrinsically related. Similarly, in the register depicting Yama in the scroll of Mahadeva's Shankhadan (Fig. 43), we can see bold, graduated tones covering the left half of his face (also compare Yama in a Kalighat *pat*: Fig. 44) . In both scrolls a conscious attempt has been made to bring into prominence the folds of the drapery. Two other scrolls of the late nineteenth century, one from Bankura[71] devoted to Kali and another from Midnapur to Chandi,[72] also show graduated 'shades' moulding Shiva's limbs (Fig. 45) and high contrast chiaroscuro in the folds of Durga's sari (Fig. 46). If these scrolls, in their present form, are thought to exemplify the earlier (pre-Kalighat) type then it must be said that the so-called 'shading' existed in Bengali painting before the arrival of British art influences and subsequently acted as source of such 'shading' in Kalighat *pat*s. From the opposite view, it is more likely that the so-called 'shading', both in the scrolls and in the Kalighat-type *pat*s, derived from the various currents of artistic environment and practice prevalent in the nineteenth century, including the *patua*s' long drawn experience in fashioning and painting clay figures and the existence of European prints and the living art practices of the time. The extent of the mutuality of give and take of these influences cannot be easily determined in the absence of dated evidence. The rural *patua*s, *kumor*s, *sutradhar*s, and others traditionally engaged in the art of painting, faced differing challenges in late eighteenth and nineteenth century Calcutta where a different genre of art prevailed. British watercolours and prints had flooded the bazaars, realistic European ceramic figures had acquired wide popularity and were copied by them, the market was radically different: the artists now painted pictures for sale as souvenirs, in a sense pre-empting the age of mechanical reproduction.

In this context, W.G. Archer's significant statement about the Kalighat painters availing of only the superficial characteristics of the British medium needs to be highlighted. Archer has repeatedly talked of 'many Anglo-Indian elements [which] made this school of Kalighat so basically un-British'.[73] This sensitive and selective distancing of the Kalighat *patua*s both from the European and indigenous characteristics, while drawing upon both, is what provides the Kalighat idiom with the genius for which it is admired. The most charming qualities of Kalighat painting owe their origin, among other factors, to these 'new and vital alterations', 'vestigial [and not academic] signs of shading',[74] and similar other mixed exposure and

Fig. 42

Fig. 42 (*Previous page*)
Jatayu Hinders Ravana's Chariot
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 59

Jatayu, Rama's mythical bird–devotee, obstructing the path of Ravana who was carrying away Sita in his chariot after abducting her. The depiction of Jatayu here is reminiscent of the depiction of the same theme in *patua* scroll paintings (*see Fig.* 41) and with Bakasura in the Kalighat paintings depicting Krishna quelling Bakasura, the crane-demon.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 43
Yama
Detail from a storyteller's scroll,
West Bengal, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
Collection: Gurusaday Museum,

Peripherally comparable with Yama in Kalighat painting (*Fig.* 44), this depiction of the god of death is remarkable for its rudimentary shading which was either practised by some *patua* scroll painters independently of the Kalighat genre or was adapted by them from the British pictures of the time, or was derived from the Kalighat paintings.

Fig. 44
Savitri Pleads with Yama
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 28 x 23 cm
Collection: Herwitz, B 8

According to a legend, Yama, the god of death, came to carry away Satyavan after his death. His wife Savitri resisted Yama and eventually, through the power of sheer devotion to her husband and her austerities, she brought him back to life. The painting shows Yama being stopped by Savitri from taking her husband away.

Fig. 43

Fig. 44

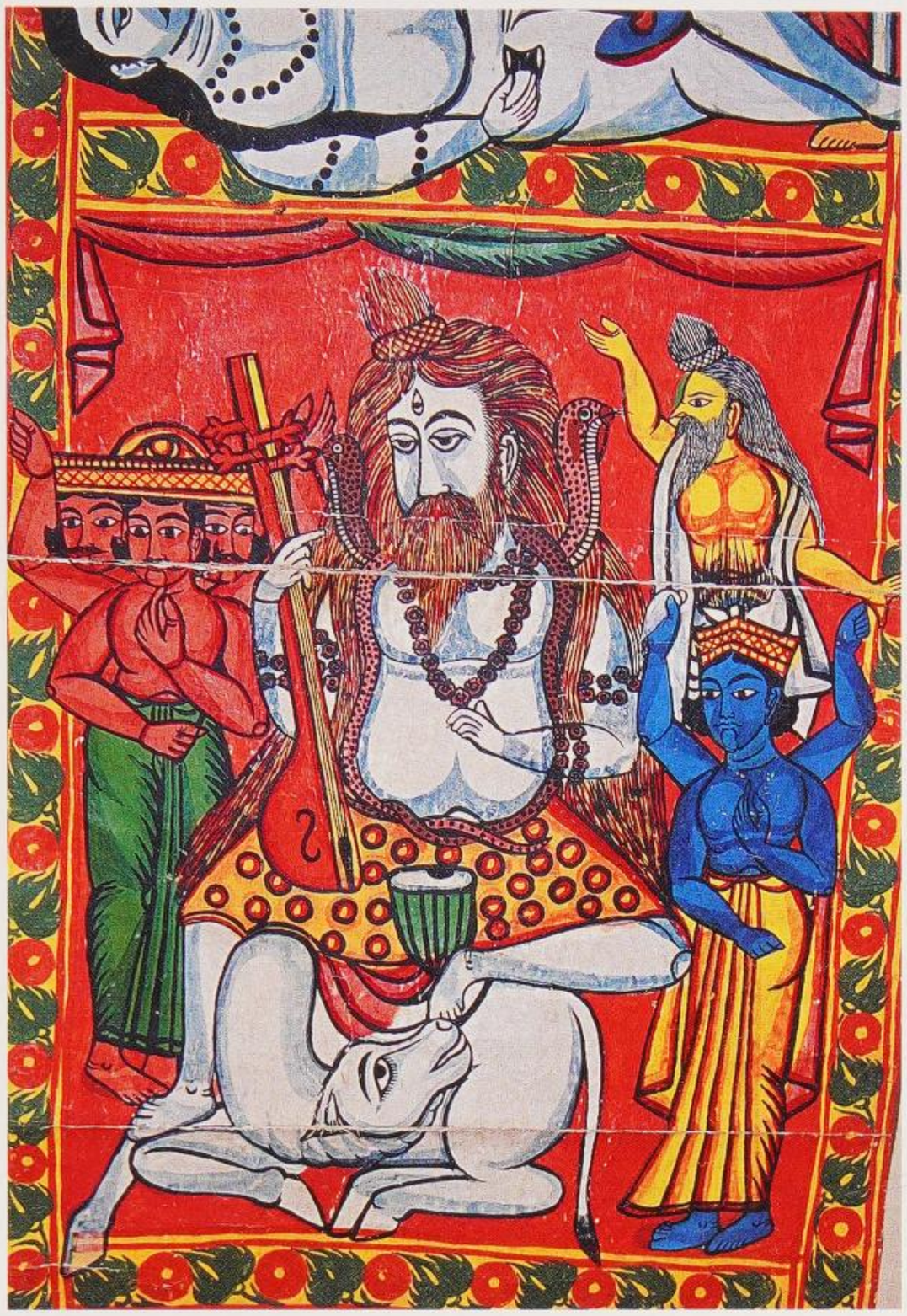

Fig. 45

Fig. 45
Shiva
Kali scroll, Bankura
second half of the 19th century.
Pigment on paper (detail)
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 1692

See caption to *Fig.* 40.

Fig. 46
Durga, Mahishasuramardini
Detail from a Chandi Mangal scroll
Midnapur, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 1698

Storytellers' scrolls with figures showing signs of shadings, as in this detail, are rare to come by. For possible pictorial influences, *see* caption to *Fig.* 43.

Fig. 46

awareness available to the artists in the fast-changing city of Calcutta. The Kalighat *patua*, using the comparatively undeveloped method of rounding the forms, either by vestigial shading or by moulding in the fashion of the sculptor's art, has succeeded in finding a new, effective language to express an apparent three-dimensionality, and naturalism of postures and gestures, and a sense of fleeting impressions. The conversion of the complex chiaroscuro into simplified marginal moulding or 'shading' attained through graded tones of colour, imparting a dramatic quality to the painting, was a technique most suited to the artists of Kalighat for their requirement of swift mass production of their work.

The features that distinguish Kalighat *pat*s most from the scroll paintings of the period is that the figures in the latter are bound in strong black outlines whereas in the former these have been discontinued. This has been ascribed to the speed at which the Kalighat artists had to work to meet the demand of the market.[75] While generally agreeing with this explanation relating to market driven forces, one should not be oblivious of the fact that the Kalighat artists, like their counterparts anywhere else, were also relishing the very act of painting, and in the process discovering the value of such pictorial elements as economy of line, tonality of colour, the effect of overlap of one colour over another, the movement of the brush when full of pigment, when dipped in water, or when drying up, or the mere sensuous pleasure of applying colour on the white surface of paper and seeing lively forms emerging in front of their eyes. The departure from the burden of remaining within the confines of the traditions of scroll painting, following certain established norms of communication (with which the storytellers' audience would be familiar), or from that of faithfully following the European convention of shading and realism, gave the painters of Kalighat *pat*s immense freedom to express themselves in a new language; the language of the Calcutta of their time.

Associated with 'shading' is the depiction of drapery folds. Apparently, both the scroll painters and the Kalighat artists of the nineteenth century had become fond of overemphasising the folds of the saris and clothes of their characters. This was not a very common feature of the Murshidabad painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Apart from their presence in the European paintings of the time, drapery folds were prominently seen in theatre curtains, as photo studio backdrops and theatrical costumes, especially under spotlight, in the second half of nineteenth century. The strong theatrical impact created by these had as influenced the scroll painters of Birbhum, Burdwan, and Midnapur as the artists of Kalighat *pat*s at least in the second half of the nineteenth century. As in the case of 'shading', drapery folds too were vestigial and simplified. In most cases mere parallel bands were drawn in conformity with the shape of the drape, more to symbolise folds than to paint them as such. Interestingly, the face, torso, and limbs were properly moulded by graduating tones of colour to impart a sense of volume, but the draped portion was generally flat and devoid of any such treatment to make it appear rotund and voluminous.

Fig. 47

Fig. 47
Ghor Kali, The Age of Decline (of Moral Values)
Krishna *pat*, Kandi, Murshidabad district, second half of 19th century.
Pigment on paper (detail)
Collection: BM, OA. 1955. 1-8. 097.
'Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum'

The depiction, on the left, of a babu leading his mother by the neck while he carries his wife on his shoulders, is popular in woodcuts related to Kalighat paintings.
For a detailed analysis, *see* T. Richard Blurton (1989).

We have earlier seen that the blank background of the Kalighat *pat*s may be a result of the practice of fashioning clay images by *patua*s and *kumor*s which had no background. However, it may also be noted that many of the nineteenth century scrolls from Birbhum, Burdwan, and Midnapur had a flat single-coloured background, usually red. This would again hint at possible mutual correspondence between the scroll painters and the Kalighat artists. Here too, it is undeniable that the artists of both genres learnt from the European and British colonial paintings to which they were exposed.

T. Richard Blurton has drawn our attention to a Krishna legend *pat*[76] collected from Kandi (the area of Murshidabad district) which illustrates the theme of Ghor Kali, the Hindu apocalypse, in one of the registers (Fig. 47) depicting a 'dandified babu with his curly hair and chinless face with his implied preference for the allure of flesh (seen in the form of his strident wife) as opposed to the calls of religion (personified by his pious mother)'.[77] The theme and its pictorial conceptualisation is very similar to the type found in Kalighat *pat*s and woodcut prints of the time. Blurton's observation that 'we may thus invoke Kalighat paintings as an intermediary in the diffusion of European ideas of naturalism to the painters of *pat*'[78] is very convincing and throws new light on the collective resources of the scroll painter and the Kalighat artists.

Apart from some of these similarities between scroll paintings and the Kalighat *pat*s that partially stem from their common hereditary occupations and partially from their shared exposure to

Fig. 51

Fig. 51
Woman in European Dress
Statue, work of a *sutradhar*, Comilla, late 18th century or early 19th century East Bengal.
Wood, about 35 cm high
Collection: Gurusaday Museum

This image, the work of a *sutradhar* carpenter, with a peculiar method of depicting drapery folds, bears a strong resemblance to its counterparts in *Fig.* 48, 49, and 62

new imagery of European origin that flooded the Calcutta of the time, there can be no ambiguity about the fact that Kalighat *pats* were in a class apart. They were not merely single panel reductions of narrative scrolls, or simple conversions of three-dimensional clay figures into two-dimensional images, or just swiftly executed rudimentary souvenirs mass-produced for pilgrims and tourists, or bare, untainted mirrors that reflected, as it were, the scene of Calcutta's contemporary social life. They were all these and much more. Even while being dramatic, proverbial, or illustrative, the paintings continued to be expressive or symbolic due to their minimal, detached, or unpremeditated rendering, bringing into play floating masses of colour with confident sweeps of the brush, attempting to envelop them. If the artist was thus able to translate the literal into the abstract with a great sense of humour, rehearsed casualness, and a feeling for sensuality, it is evident that he was sharply observing the complex play of mixed contemporary imagery in the fast changing, new city of Calcutta, and was consciously selecting or rejecting elements from his inherited tradition or the new external baggage. I shall deal with this aspect at length in a subsequent chapter.

The Role of the *Sutradhar* Carpenters

The role of the traditional Bengali caste of *sutradhar*, or professional carpenters, in the development of a style of drawing and painting that quite closely approximated the Kalighat idiom, has been grossly undermined and is thus deserving of close attention here. *Sutradhars* are found largely concentrated in Burdwan, Bankura, Howrah, Hooghly, Calcutta, Murshidabad, 24–Parganas, Midnapur, and Birbhum. In some areas, they have adopted the title *bhaskara*.[79] It is said that the section of woodcarvers that took to stone carving became known as *bhaskara*.[80] In the Bishnupur area, a few *sutradhar* families were traditionally engaged in making painted playing cards and held the honorary hereditary title of '*fauzdar*'.[81]

In addition to woodcarving, their primary hereditary occupation, the *sutradhars* are known to have practised clay image making, painting on cloth and paper (including scroll painting), wooden book cover painting, making painted playing cards, carving low relief panels for chariots and furniture.[82] It has been recorded that till recently in Hatserandi village, Birbhum district, a few well-known families of *sutradhars* practised scroll painting.[83] The style has now completely vanished with the death of Sasadhar Sutradhar, the last painter of the community.[84] What was once known as *Kalighater putul* or the Kalighat puppets/dolls, were not made at Kalighat but were brought there from Katwa and other centres in Burdwan where these were made by carpenters.[85]

A review of a few examples of a peculiar type of painting assigned to *sutradhars*, and a comparison of these with the Kalighat type *pats*, would immediately reveal that the carpenter–painters who were adept in three-dimensional woodcarving and relief work brought into their painting that added sense of augmented form that was integral to their professional practice. As woodcarvers, the *sutradhars* were used to first selecting the highest plane of the figure and then

Fig. 48

Fig. 48
Lakshmi with Attendants
Drawing by a *sutradhar* of Burdwan, late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal.
Lampblack on paper, c. 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Gurusaday Museum

The drawing, the work of a *sutradhar* carpenter, resembles in several respects, including high contrast chiaroscuro, the paintings from Series E of the Herwitz Collection. In the Kalighat *pats*, the breasts of the female characters are made to appear voluptuous by employing graded tones of colour, whereas in this drawing as well as in the Herwitz series (both assignable to carpenters), the circles of the breasts are marked out by lifting up pigment (*see Fig.* 64, 66, and 69). The way in which the drapery folds have been depicted, especially, the skirt of the fan bearer on the right in this figure, that in the wooden sculpture (*Fig.* 51), and the variant in *Fig.* 69, establish the hand of carpenters in their creation.

Fig. 49

Fig. 49
Krishna and Radha
Drawing by a *sutradhar* of Burdwan, late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal.
Lampblack on paper, c. 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Gurusaday Museum

See caption to *Fig.* 48

Note the closeness of Krishna's posture, his cape, the fanning folds of his *dhoti* below his right leg and the lotus pedestal; this figure and *Fig.* 63, further corroborating that there were *sutradhar* painters among the Kalighat artists.

Fig. 50

Fig. 50
Kartika
Drawing by a *sutradhar* of Burdwan, late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal.
Lampblack on paper, c. 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Gurusaday Museum

See captions to *Fig.* 48 and 49

moving on to treatment of the areas to be carved in relief. This method of theirs has led to the creation of a cut-out effect of white areas contrasting with darker areas in their black-and-white drawings.[86] Let us first examine two of the three black-and-white drawings supposedly collected by the late Gurusaday Dutt around the 1930s from the *sutradhar*s of Mertala, Burdwan. Apparently, similar ones were also collected from the *sutradhar*s of the same region by the late S.K. Roy, now in the Ashutosh Museum in Calcutta.[87] According to one source, these were done with lampblack on paper and were, therefore, known as *bhushokari* (*bhusho* meaning lampblack and *kari* meaning work).[88] These drawings (*see* Fig. 48, 49, and 50) at once appear to be related to Kalighat *pat*s for three reasons, i.e. their blank backgrounds, their method of amplification of forms by 'shading', and

their overstated drapery folds, not to mention the iconographic similarities. Excessive emphasis on volume and drapery folds suggests that either these drawings were meant to be exercises or sketches to guide the woodcarver in relation to correct emphasis on volume as he translated these into wooden figures or relief panels, or that these were independent drawings done by *sutradhar*s in which their usual experience of carving figures in three dimensions has manifested itself.

The connection of these drawings with the *sutradhar*s becomes even more apparent if we compare a carved wooden figure from Bengal (Fig. 51) with them. The manner in which the female figure on the right, holding a palm leaf hand fan (Fig. 48), slightly lifts up her gown, causing the multiple folds of drapery to appear from the grip of her hand downwards, is also very evident in the wooden figure just mentioned. This comparison, in combination with other features such as the general iconographic traits, postures, and gestures of figures, and the form of simplified and high contrast 'shading', virtually resembling patterns, do persuade us to believe that *sutradhar*s may have played an important role in establishing some of the norms of the Kalighat idiom.

Fig. 52

Fig. 52
Angel
Drawing, presumably by a *sutradhar*, from a 'Kalighat sketchbook', late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal.
Pencil and ink on paper
c. 28 x 20 cm
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 480-1

See caption to Fig. 53.

In the collection of the Gurusaday Dutt Museum there are two sketchbooks containing a number of leaves. A majority of these sketches show Hindu religious images framed within scrolling creepers of the type to be found in the Victorian colonial furniture of that period (Fig. 52). There is a remarkable similarity between the drawing of this figure and that in Fig. 53, of E Series of the Herwitz collection to be discussed shortly. Moreover, these sketches show a definite attempt at 'shading' to emphasise volume (Fig. 54). Both these features, especially the scrolling creeper frames, hint at the fact that the artists were *sutradhar*s and the sketches were made as aide-mémoires for carving panels for furniture, and doors and windows. Apart from this function of these drawings, the *sutradhar*'s ability to draw with the intention of creating a three-dimensionality of image, bring these sketches close to the Kalighat *pat*s in several respects. Significantly, the sketchbooks are entered in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum as 'Kalighat sketchbooks' and were collected by the late Gurusaday Dutt himself between 1920–30.

Another inscribed and dated piece of evidence of *sutradhar* painting comes in the form of paintings done on the walls of a temple at Boharu in South 24–Parganas. According to the family records of the descendants of the patron who built the temple, it was built by a certain Nanda Kumar Bose in the Bengali year 1232 (i.e. AD1825). The wall paintings principally illustrate Krishna-lila. At the centre of one of

Fig. 53

Fig. 53
Mahakala–Shiva
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 80

In its depiction the figure bears kinship with some of the drawings in the 'Kalighat sketchbook', apparently the property of a *sutradhar* carpenter.
(*see Fig.* 52 and 54)

Fig. 54

Fig. 54
Durga
Drawing, presumably by a *sutradhar*, from a 'Kalighat sketchbook' late 19th century or early 20th century, West Bengal.
Pencil and ink on paper
c. 28 x 20 cm
Collection: Gurusaday Museum
GM 480-1

See caption to *Fig.* 53.

Fig. 55

the walls of the outer veranda, there is an inscription that reads: *'ati dina hina bhaktajana* Durgarama Bhaskarena *chitra karena'* (the paintings are done by Durgaram Bhaskar, a very poor and lowly devotee). The centimetre-thick layer of plaster applied over the stone masonry walls of the temple is now peeling off. There is no visible sign of any earlier layer of plaster or of any previous painting visible and the colours appear to be faded and fully embedded in the plaster, so there appears to be little reason to doubt that the paintings were done at around the same time as the construction of the temple, i.e. 1825. It is significant that the paintings are ascribed to Durgaram Bhaskar. As mentioned earlier, *bhaskar* was another name for *sutradhar*s or it may be that *sutradhar*s who worked in stone adopted 'Bhaskar' as a title. If this interpretation is accepted, the Boharu temple wall paintings provide a handsome example of the *sutradhar* genre of painting.

Fig. 56

Fig. 55
Radha
Detail from a temple wall painting, Baharu, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, 1825

An inscription on one of the walls of the temple assigns the paintings to Durgaram Bhaskar, a carpenter. The wall paintings bear distinct signs of the use of graded tones of colour conveying an effect of vestigial shading.

Here again, as in the case of the black-and-white drawings of *sutradhar*s from Burdwan, referred to earlier, there is a persistent attempt at accentuating the drapery folds and providing a sense of rotundity through graded tones of brown to the limbs of the human characters portrayed (Fig. 55). The typical 'shading', symmetrically spreading on either side of the nose and under the eyes of the figures, together with the forehead ornaments that have a crest akin to a peacock-feather or paisley make these paintings and the *sutradhar* painters important players in the origin and development of the Kalighat genre.

Yet another formidable example of *sutradhar* painting is preserved in the Ananda Niketan Kirtishala Museum, Bagnan, Howrah District (Fig. 56). This canvas painting depicting the theme of the coronation of Rama was meant to be a ritual hanging to be affixed to a religious chariot. Its caption reads: *Ratha-sajja*, chariot decoration, canvas, painted by *sutradhar shilpi, nineteenth century*, Haora. Here the most characteristic feature of the *sutradhar* style of painting, i.e. the exaggerated drapery folds of theatrical costumes, virtually resembling rippled theatre curtains of silk or velvet, is manifested in the costumes worn by Rama, Sita, Bharata, Shatrughna, and other attendants; a variety of typically gathered turbans and headgear worn by male characters, embroidered Kashmir shawls thrown over the shoulders of each in the fashion of the male members of aristocratic families in the

Fig. 56
Rama and Sita, Coronation Ceremony
Detail of a painted fragment of a chariot cover, the work of a *sutradhar* from Bengal, 19th century.
Watercolour on cloth
c. 1200 x 900 cm
Collection: Ananda Niketan Kirtishala, Bagnan, Howrah District West Bengal

See caption to *Fig.* 57.

Although all the courtiers and attendants in the painting are shown wearing Indian turbans, conspicuously Rama has been endowed with a British crown. His embroidered Kashmir shawl, Sita's fanning drapery folds below her leg, and the character of the fan-bearer, next to her, correspond to respective features in *Fig.* 70, 61, and 60, and in that order, once again hinting at a *sutradhar* origin of these paintings.

Calcutta of the time; the tableauesque postures of the deities and their attendants, akin to a climactic scene of Ramlila theatre complete with rolled-up theatre curtains, is there in abundance, and in addition the unique form of shading described above. It is significant that *sutradhars*, renowned for making carved wooden relief panels depicting mythological scenes, should have undertaken this canvas painting to adorn a chariot, and no wonder that a certain sense of depth and typical chiaroscuro natural to shallow relief carved panels are clearly visible here.

Let us now turn to the question of the contribution of *sutradhars* to the development of the so-called Kalighat style. As has been mentioned earlier, there is no *one* unified and singular style of painting that can be termed the 'Kalighat style' but there were a variety of related idioms that have been loosely clubbed together under the generic name 'Kalighat' by scholars. In the collection of Chester and Davida Herwitz is an album containing about 95 paintings, each of which measures 21.5 x 17.5 cm and is framed on all sides by a narrow black outline. Apart from those depicting divine couples such as Krishna and Radha or Shiva and Parvati, each painting almost invariably represents a single mythological character or a deity painted at the centre of the paper. On the ground of the striking stylistic similarities between the black-and-white *sutradhar* drawings, probably executed as aides mémoires, the Bagnan Museum canvas, the Baharu temple murals mentioned earlier, and this series from the Herwitz collection, it becomes more than evident that all these works have stemmed from a common tradition that was strikingly different from the so-called mainstream Kalighat type,[89] and as such give us enough reason to believe that there was a distinctly identifiable style of painting that can be designated the *'sutradhar style'*, and that it made a major contribution in enriching the new genre of painting in Calcutta during the nineteenth century that was to become popularly known as 'Kalighat painting'.

The Bagnan Museum canvas ascribed to a *sutradhar* artist becomes the key for us to decipher the authorship of the Herwitz album alluded to above. As we shall see below, the various features of style evidenced in the Bagnan canvas are also to be found in the Herwitz set, making it unmistakably the work of either the same *sutradhar* artist or of one working in the same tradition. This comparison also attests to the fact that all the so-called Kalighat *pats* were not the works of *patuas* and that the *sutradhar* carpenters played a major role in the origin and development of that idiom.

Look closely at the dark-looking male character standing with folded hands in Fig. 57, which is a detail of the Bagnan Museum canvas. The man, wearing a double-breasted tunic with sleeves and multiple gathers in its skirt section, stands in great devotion to Rama, whose coronation ceremony he is attending. He is wearing a *safa* type turban comprising a loose strip of cloth wound round the head with prominent folds in evidence. His long hair hang below the ears and he is sporting a heavy moustache. The face and the folded hands are marked by prominent highlights and shades. Over his left shoulder

Fig. 57

Fig. 57
Vibhishana and Others at Rama's Coronation
Detail of a painted fragment of a chariot cover, probably the work of a *sutradhar* of Bengal, 19th century.
Pigment on cloth, c. 1200 x 900 cm
Collection: Ananda Niketan Kirtishala, Bagnan, Howrah District, West Bengal

The painting, assigned to a *sutradhar*, is remarkable for the Mughal style attire of the characters and their highly emphasised drapery folds in combination with Corinthian columns and rippled curtains in the background.

Among the courtiers and attendants, the second figure from right bears close affinity with *Fig.* 58 and the one on extreme left with *Fig.* 59, both belonging to a Kalighat album of 90 paintings indicating *sutradhar* authorship of these works in the Herwitz collection.

and right hand there is a white shawl with a black pattern, and though this is not clear in his case but by comparison with the similar shawls worn by Rama and his other attendants, it can be surmised it is a paisley type shawl from Kashmir, highly popular among the wealthy of nineteenth century Calcutta.

Now let us look at Fig. 58, which is one of the 95 paintings of a unique album in the Herwitz collection. The painting apparently depicts Vibhishana, as is indicated by the inscriptions at the bottom in the Roman and Bengali scripts. It is well-known that in the *Ramayana*, Vibhishana, Ravana's brother became a devotee of Rama, and as such often appears in paintings illustrating the theme of the latter's coronation.[90] Apart from the identity of characters, our present concern is to look at the striking similarities in both works, in the form of the dark complexion of Vibhishana, his particular gesture of folded

Fig. 58

Fig. 58
Vibhishana
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 42

For detailed analysis of the pictorial concept and treatment of the figure *see* captions to *Fig.* 56 and 57.

This figure, in its conception and general appearance is quite similar to the depiction of one of the attendants in the 'coronation of Rama', *Fig.* 57 (the Bagnan canvas assigned to *sutradhars*) and, as such, serves as a key to the interpretation that Series E is possibly the work of *sutradhars*.

Fig. 60

Fig. 59
Nandi
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Water colour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 62

In this anthropomorphic representation, Nandi, Shiva's bull-vehicle, is endowed with the latter's tigerskin attire. The conceptualisation of Nandi's figure bears great similarity to that of an attendant in the 'coronation of Rama' canvas assigned to *sutradhars* (*Fig.* 57), underlining the possibility of common authorship of this genre of painting.

Fig. 60
Bharata
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 32

For detailed analysis of the pictorial concept and treatment of the figure, *see* captions to *Fig.* 57 and 58.

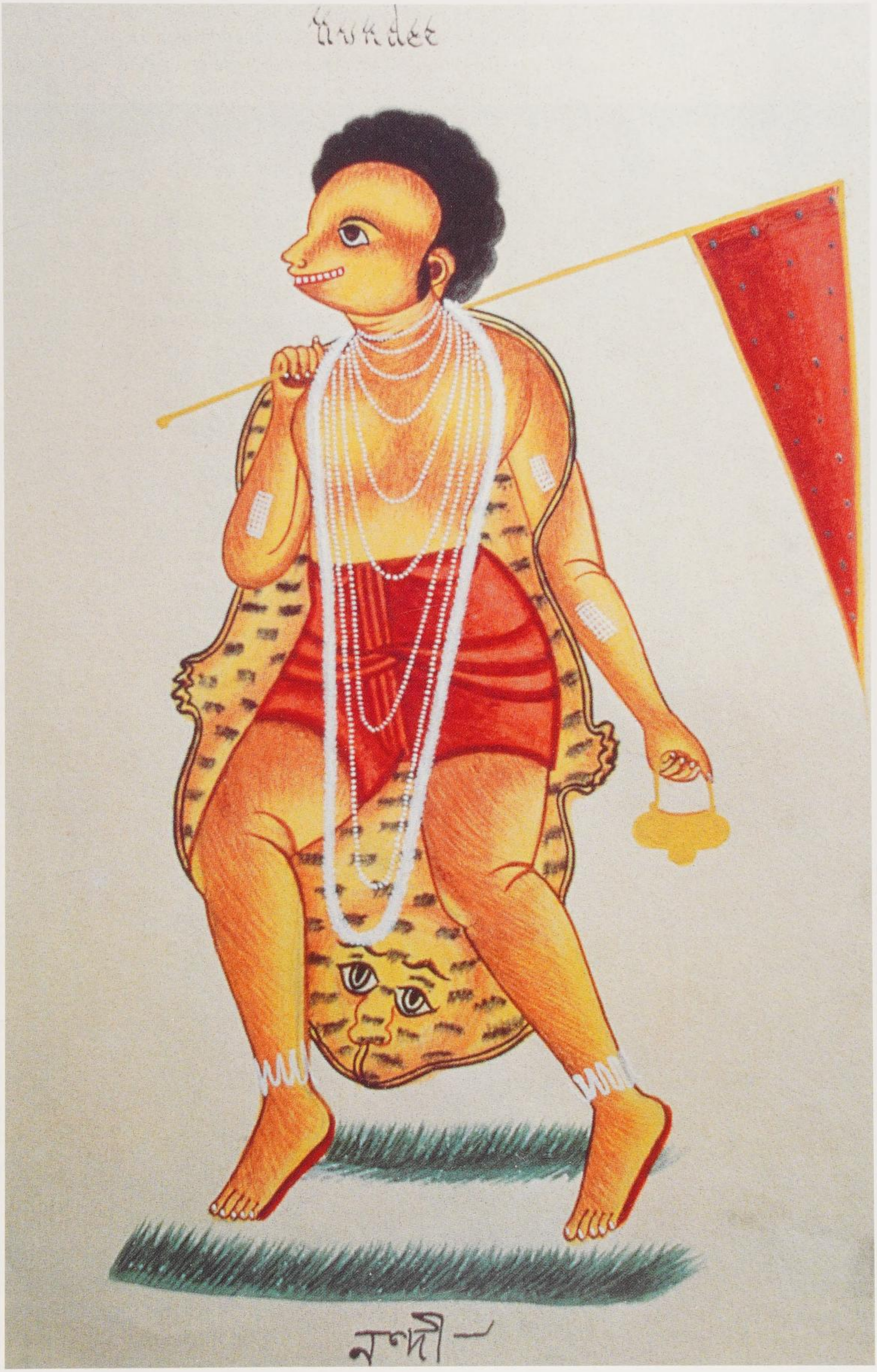

Fig. 59

Fig. 61

hands, the posture of the body, the sleeves, and the tunic with multiple gathers indicated by prominent lights and shades, the faces and the folded hands showing vestiges of shading, prominent ruffles in the turbans, and Kashmir type paisley shawls placed over the shoulders of the characters. There is an equally remarkable similarity between the animal-headed figure behind Vibhishana (Fig. 57) and that of Nandi (Fig. 59) from the E Series of Herwitz. Similarly, let us compare the character on the extreme right in Fig. 56, which is another detail of the Bagnan Museum canvas with another painting from the Herwitz album (Fig. 60). Here yet another dark-complexioned person, holding a hand fan, wearing a similar tunic with high contrast drapery folds and an embroidered shawl thrown over his left shoulder is shown standing. His face and hands have dominant signs of shading, and he is shown wearing large earrings. While holding a hand fan in one hand he is shown lifting up his long tunic slightly to facilitate standing or walking. Fig. 60 has an inscription in roman and Bengali scripts which tells us that the character represents Bharata, Rama's stepbrother who was enthroned in Ayodhya in the latter's place when Rama was banished to a forest for 14 years.

Now let us turn our attention to Sita in Fig. 56, a detail from the same Bagnan canvas. Here Sita is shown seated cross-legged on a throne next to Rama. She is shown clad in a blue sari, the way in which it has been draped being emphasised by the various directions in which its billowy folds move. Most characteristic is the way in which she pulls the sari over her head and holds it with her right hand to form a small canopy over her. Here, once again, the *sutradhar* artists' fascination with drapery folds comes to the fore. The fanning folds issuing from below her ankle are directly related to similar folds of Radha's skirt in Fig. 61 and evoke a reference to the palm leaf hand fan held by a female in Fig. 48, a *sutradhar*'s aide-mémoire. The drapery-loving artist of the Bagnan Museum canvas has indulgently let the folded end panel of Sita's sari fall over her left hand with its undulating z-shaped edge conspicuously underlined. These features of *sutradhar* style evoke comparison with several paintings of the Herwitz album mentioned above, especially Fig. 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, and 68. Equally comparable is the stylised manner in which the sutradhar artist delineates the action of some of the female characters slightly lifting up their skirts. Take for instance the female holding a palm leaf fan, Fig. 48, who is shown lifting up her skirt and thereby precipitating a flow of drapery folds from her fist downwards. The hem of the skirt, when lifted, forms a wavy, fluted arch. This feature has become a hallmark of the *sutradhar* style and can be found not only in Fig. 69 of the Herwitz album and Fig. 49 of aide-mémoire drawings in the Gurusaday Dutt Museum collection but also in the carved wooden statue depicted in Fig. 51. The Kashmir paisley type shawl worn by male characters in the Bagnan canvas is a regular feature of male attire in the Herwitz album (Fig. 70, 60, and 71). Pearl necklaces, beaded paisleys, and broad, gem-studded bangles appear to be very popular with the *sutradhar* artist; the cross-shaped wrist ornament of the *patua*-made paintings being completely absent here. Remarkably, Sita in the Bagnan Museum canvas, the female figures in all three aide-mémoire drawings from the Gurusaday Dutt Museum collection, and all the

Fig. 61
Krishna Begging Radha for His Flute
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 69

For detailed analysis of the pictorial concept and treatment of the figures, *see* captions to *Fig.* 56 and 58. The theme depicted here is that of a jealous Radha taking away Krishna's flute to prevent him from attracting other *gopi*s who have been drawn to him by the enchantment of its music.

Fig. 62

Fig. 63

Fig. 64

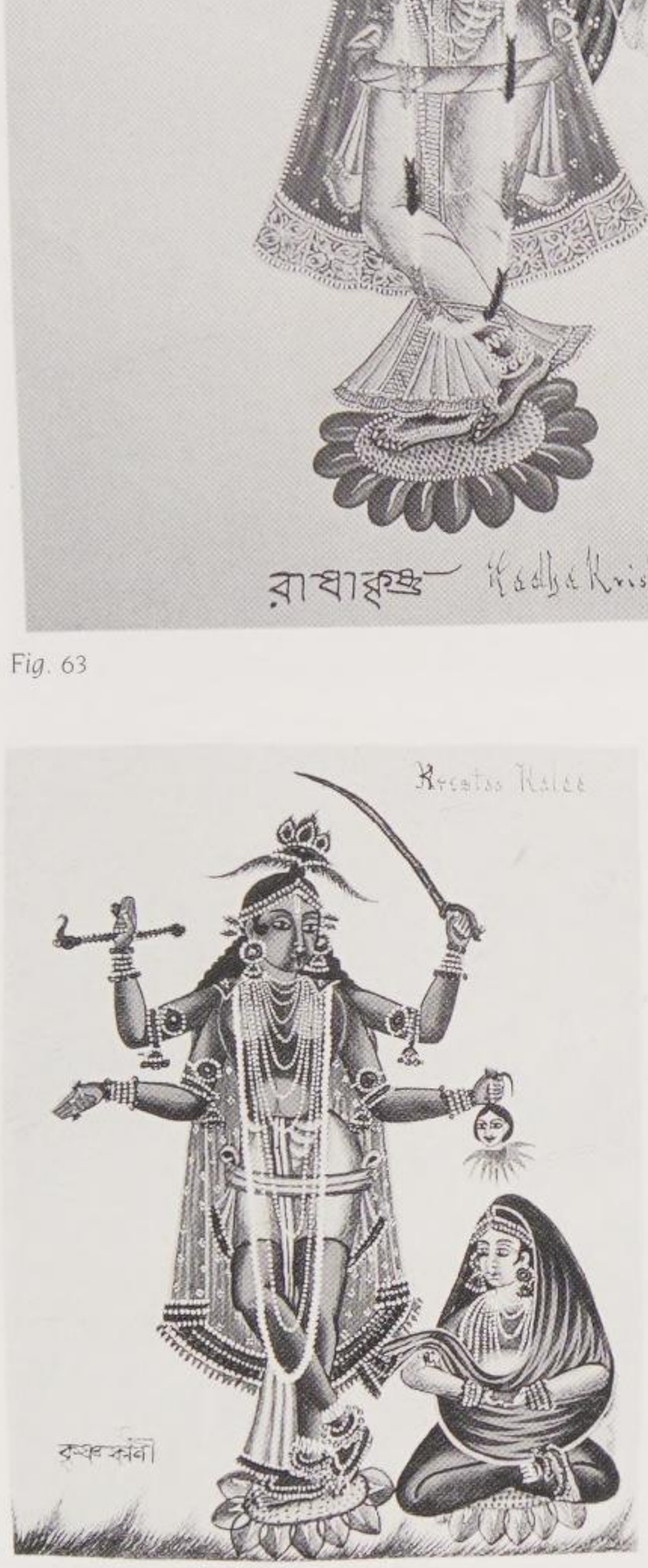

Fig. 65

Fig. 62
Radha and Krishna: Auspicious Togetherness
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 22

In this tableau of blissful union of Radha and Krishna in the company of Balarama and their pet cow, the artist has indulgently used the translucent quality of the blue watercolour. The characteristic folds of the hem of Radha's skirt and the intricate patterns on the sides of the throne are among the hallmarks of the *sutradhar* idiom.
Also see captions to Fig. 48 and 51.

Fig. 63 (*see* page 207)
Radha–Krishna
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 34

This image of the blissful union of Radha and Krishna, the latter playing the flute, stems from the climactic tableau formed at the end of *rasalila* or other such performances relating to Krishna worship.

Fig. 64 (*see* page 208)
Kaumari
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 48

The play of luminous chiaroscuro in the figure of the goddess Kaumari inflames the entire picture plane.

Fig. 65 (*see* page 209)
Radha Worships Krishna as Kali
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 52

According to a popular legend, Krishna's beloved milkmaid Radha was Ayanaghosha's wife. Whenever Radha was together with Krishna and Ayanaghosha appeared, Krishna instantly transformed himself into Kali and Radha into her devotee.

In the painting Krishna is shown bearing his attributes along with those of Kali.

Fig. 66

Fig. 67

Fig. 66
Maheshvari
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 54

Maheshvari, Maheshvar's consort, depicted riding Shiva's Nandi (bull) vehicle. A peculiar feature of the style of the artist of this series is that the figure is conceptualised as though floating in the air, while a seat or a mount is painted below, as if the two had no connection. In other words, the artist has several stock images that are combined into an iconographic composition rather than all combined into a unified whole.

Fig. 67
Vishnu
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 64

The highlights on Vishnu's thighs and calf may be *seen* in the background of the caption to *Fig.* 49.

women in the Herwitz album—all works presumably by *sutradhars*—wear blouses, and this is rarely the case with most of the Kalighat *pats*.

In contrast to the usual Kalighat *pats*, which are apparently the works of *patuas* and are in the standard folio size, the *sutradhar* paintings of the Herwitz album are in a smaller format, i.e. 21 x 18 cm. Moreover, the speedy execution marked by confident sweeps and curves, and the playful, often incomplete coloration and simplification of form which are the essential features of the *patua*-made Kalighat *pats*, are absent in the *sutradhar* works. The latter are more finished, laboured, and detailed, and therefore, to a degree, rigid.

The most noticeable feature of this distinctive *sutradhar* style of painting was the manner in which three-dimensionality was depicted. We have seen earlier that the *patua*-made Kalighat pats also strove to lend rotundity to forms by means of graduated tones of colour strongly emerging from one side of a limb and gradually fading out. This method conveyed an illusion of volume, but more in the manner of a moulder's art than that of a painter practising academic shading. The *sutradhar* painters, too, strove to grapple with the problem while depicting volume on a two-dimensional surface, but the technique employed by them was completely different. The *sutradhars*, like the *patuas* and *kumors* are adept in painting three-dimensional figures and reliefs but their approach to rendering volume has strong connection with their perception of light. Let me however hasten to add here that their awareness of the possibility of light causing a certain element of

Fig. 68

Fig. 69

Fig. 70

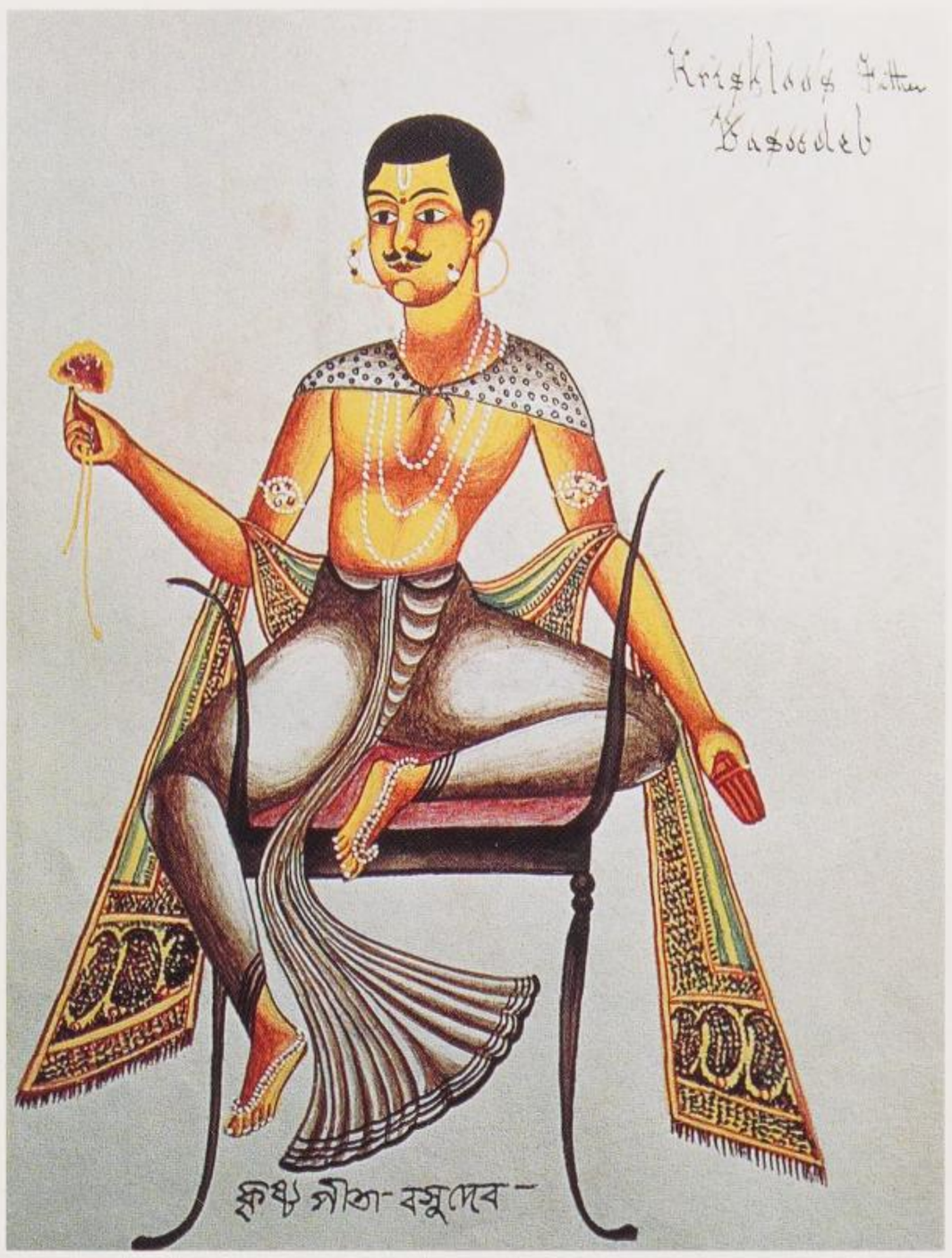

Fig. 71

Fig. 68
Ugrachandi Guarding Lanka
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 79

For detailed analysis of the pictorial concept and treatment of the figure, *see* captions to Fig. 57 and 69.

Here the goddess Ugrachandi is depicted as the guardian deity of Ravana's Lanka. Ravana was a great devotee of Shiva and therefore Chandi's presence in Lanka is not surprising. Notable is the tiny figure of Hanuman who has secretly found his way to Lanka.

Fig. 69
Sumitra, Mother of Lakshmana
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 7

Series E of the Herwitz collection of Kalighat paintings differs greatly from most of the paintings generally subsumed under the label 'Kalighat'. For the reasons given in the text, the series is assigned to *sutradhar* carpenters who are also known to have practised painting.

Among other features, the series is distinguished by sharp contrast chiaroscuro often leading to a highlight effect, marked emphasis on drapery folds, and a generally sculpturesque treatment of forms.

Here the manner in which the skirt is lifted up, causing the formation of a staggered arch of folds, is similar to that in the wooden statue (Fig. 51) and the drawing of an attendant (Fig. 48), both works of *sutradhar* carpenters, underpinning the argument that the series could have been painted by *sutradhars*.

Fig. 70
Shatrughna
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 27

Already in the first half of the nineteenth century, several Bengali plays were staged in the European theatre tradition. The mythological characters were conceptualised in the images of the *bhadralok*, whose lifestyle was influenced by, among other things, Mughal court culture.

Here Shatrughna, Rama's half-brother, is shown wearing a theatre-curtain like attire viewed as under stage lights. The Kashmiri *jamavar* shawl (a status symbol of the *bhadralok* of nineteenth century Calcutta) thrown over his shoulders, together with the emphatic drapery folds, brings the painting close to the 'coronation of Rama' canvas of *sutradhars* (Fig. 56).
Also see caption to Fig. 69.

Fig. 71
Vasudeva, Krishna's Father
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 73

For detailed analysis of the pictorial concept and treatment of the figure, *see* captions to Fig. 69 and 56.

chiaroscuro to result has little to do with the realistic shading found in academic painting. The chiaroscuro found in the *sutradhar* painting is more akin to that in still life than in real life. The tones of light and shade are in high contrast, harsh and edgy, leading to frequent appearance of flashes of light. The overall effect is therefore one of a strong source of light illuminating a cluster of inanimate objects or statues or characters on stage in a theatrical situation.

The luminous, dramatic effect of lighting in *sutradhar* painting stems, in all probability, from their practice of woodcarving. When exposed to strong light from the top or sides, the facial features, limbs, as well as the drapery folds of carved figures must have produced the theatrical effect that so dominates their paintings. Conversely, they were used to preparing sketches and drawings for their eventual conversion into carved wooden relief panels. It was a prerequisite of these drawings that they showed the depth dimension clearly to provide the relief carver with adequate guidance in relation to depiction of volume. For either reason, the *sutradhars* had learned to accentuate relief in their work as woodcarvers and this came in handy when they worked as painters. In other words, the *sutradhars* had developed a more acute awareness of the dramatic effect of lighting on a three-dimensional object than had the *patuas*.

The Collective Cultural Heritage and Image Formation

Jatra, street theatre; *swang*, pantomime; *khemta*, sprightly, popular dance; *kobiwalla*, poetry; *padavali kirtan*, devotional singing, and *panchali*, singing to the accompaniment of instruments with intermittent recitation, were all part of nineteenth century Calcutta's cultural life and formed as much a part of the composite folk culture of the city as the paintings in the Kalighat idiom. There is no doubt that the Kalighat artists drew inspiration and resources from these folk traditions as much as from the conventional practices of fashioning clay figures, scroll painting, and woodcarving; from the availability of new materials such as watercolour, and the new market generated by the increased flow of pilgrims and tourists. The above mentioned visual, performing, and oral traditions of the folk culture of Bengal had imbibed considerable influences from the new urban environment of the city, and in the process a generic transition of order, from 'folk' to 'popular', had occurred.

Fig. 72
Shiva's Family on an Outing
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 35

The painting truly stems from the bazaar. Middle-aged family man Shiva is on an outing. Using his *damru* (drum) as a child's rattle, he attempts to entertain infant Ganesha, seated on his lap, while Parvati pacifies the child by clapping her hands.

This down-to-earth and playful conception of a cultic image is a characteristic of the genre.

In the Folk tradition of devotional songs represented by *padavali kirtan*, which drew heavily on the love poetry of Vidyapati and Chandidas:

> the loves of Krishna and his consort Radha were described in human and homely romantic terms ... the domestication of the divinities and the narration of their exploits in the familiar language of the people stood in sharp contrast with the earlier lyrics of Jayadev, the Bengali poet who composed in Sanskrit.[91]

Similarly, the folk poet Ramprasad Sen, patronised by Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nabadwip, who was a devotee of Kali, portrayed the goddess resembling 'typical female characters in Bengali homes—sometimes a shrewish housewife, sometimes a

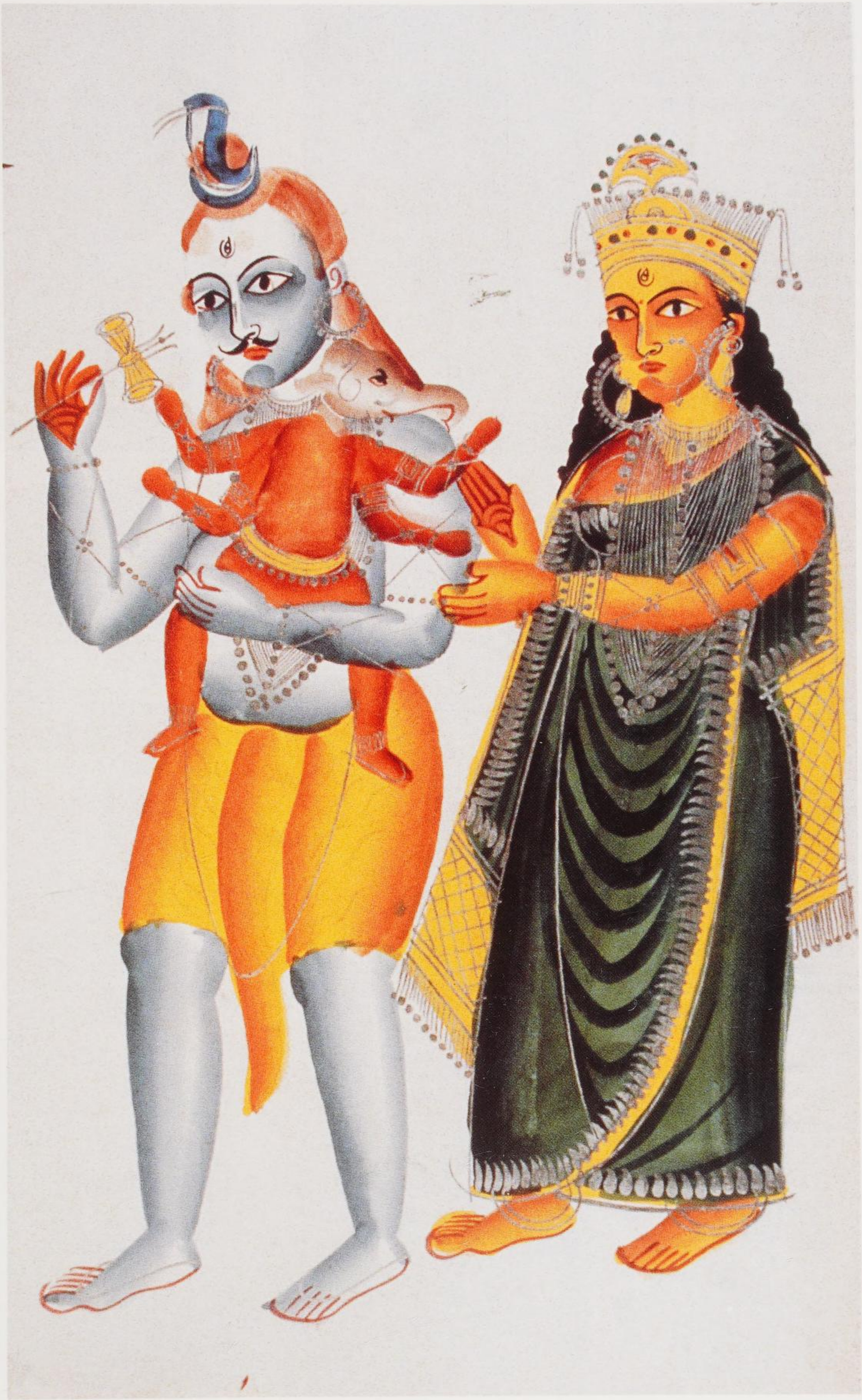

Fig. 72

Fig. 73 (*see* page 210)
Shiva Carrying the Infant Ganesha on his Lap
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 7

Ganesha, the pampered baby, wears a crown, and like the true son of his father, has a cobra around his neck. Shiva lovingly holds his son with one hand and attempts to entertain him with his *damru*, which he holds as if it were a child's rattle, in the other.

Shiva's tigerskin loincloth prominently depicts the hanging tail of the animal which obviously reflects the custom of the nineteenth century Bengali babu to demonstratively display the pleats of his *dhoti* as an indicator of his upper class status.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 73

Fig. 74

Fig. 74 (*see* page 211)
Shiva's Marriage
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 31

A characteristic example of the Kalighat milieu, this painting of Shiva's marriage is cast in the mould of a round the corner middle-class wedding in Calcutta.

Fig. 75
Shiva and Parvati on Nandi
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 115

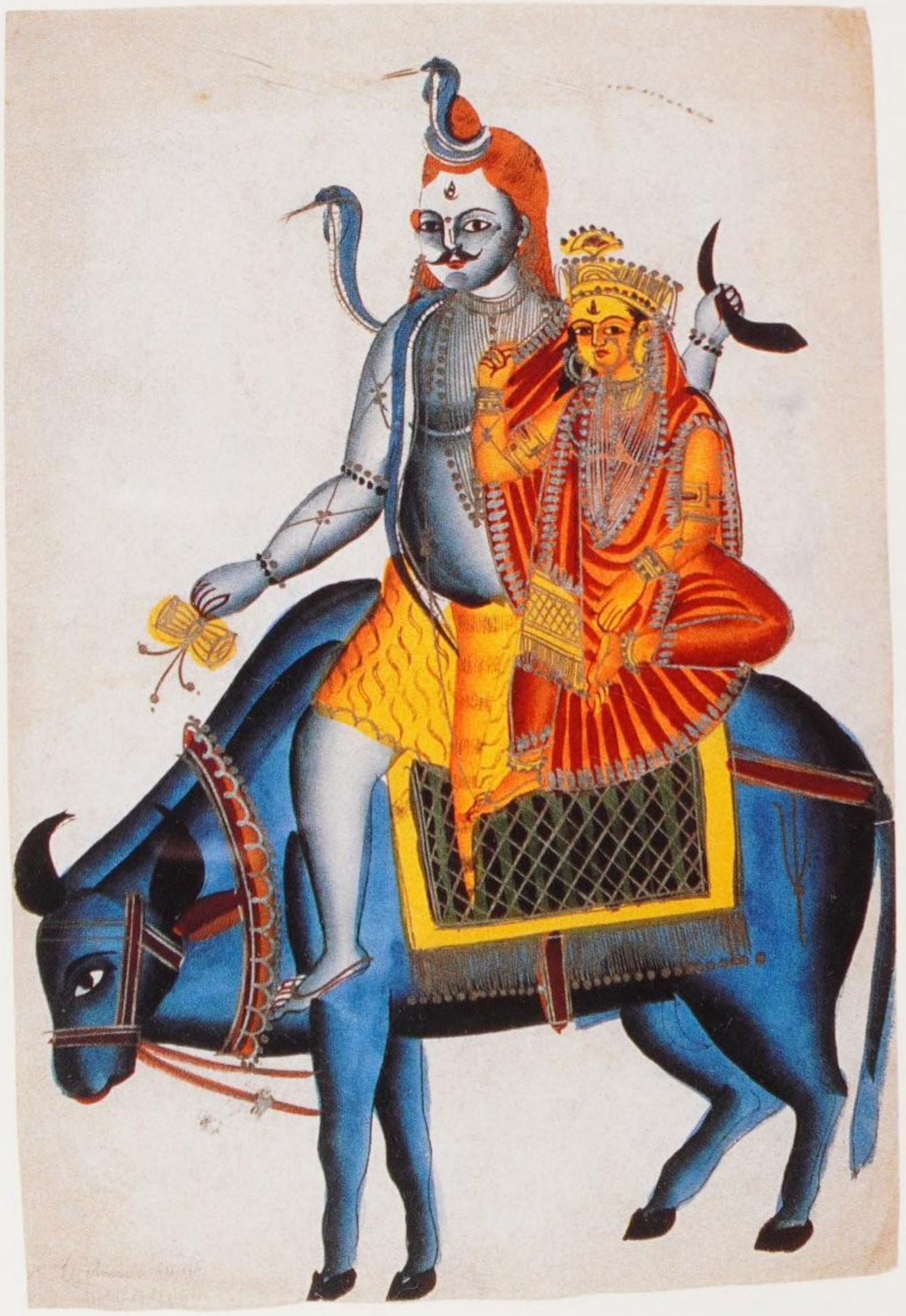

Fig. 75

Fig. 76

Fig. 76 (see page 212)
Shiva and Parvati
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 54

Literally a picture of marital bliss, the painting is cast in the mould of a 'just married' photograph of Shiva and Parvati seated on a throne, above their Nandi vehicle. The effect of a theatrical tableau is enhanced by the presence of rippled curtains on top. The standardised figuration is comparable to that of Rama and Sita in *Fig.* 119, which also has curtains on top.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 77

Fig. 77
Infant Krishna with Parents: Vasudeva and Jashoda
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 207

In all probability based on the Christian concept of 'The Holy Family', here Vasudeva and Yashoda are portrayed with infant Krishna, their gazes fixed on the onlooker (devotee or audience), or do they form a photo group?

Fig. 78

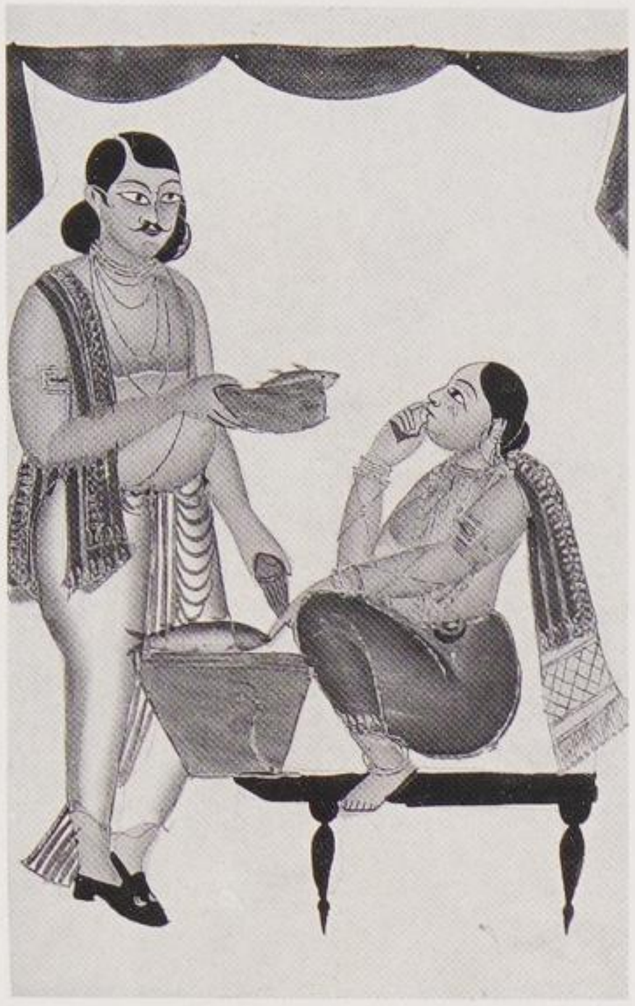

Fig. 79

Fig. 78
Annapurna
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 5

His body smeared with ashes, his matted hair tied in a bun with a cobra, a mendicant's bag hanging over his shoulders, his eyes intoxicated with cannabis, and his tiger skin loincloth slipping off as he approaches Annapurna, Shiva in this painting has been modelled in the image of a street vagabond.

Fig. 79 (see page 213)
Man buying Fish
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 162

In this representation of the 'theatre of everyday life' (under rippled curtains), the man flirtatiously taps the fisherwoman's hand while negotiating the rate.

Fig. 80
Radha Caressing Krishna's Foot
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 2

This theme is much celebrated in medieval Indian devotional literature as an expression of Radha's love for Krishna. Later depictions of a babu falling at the feet of his beloved and vice versa apparently found a ready model in these paintings.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

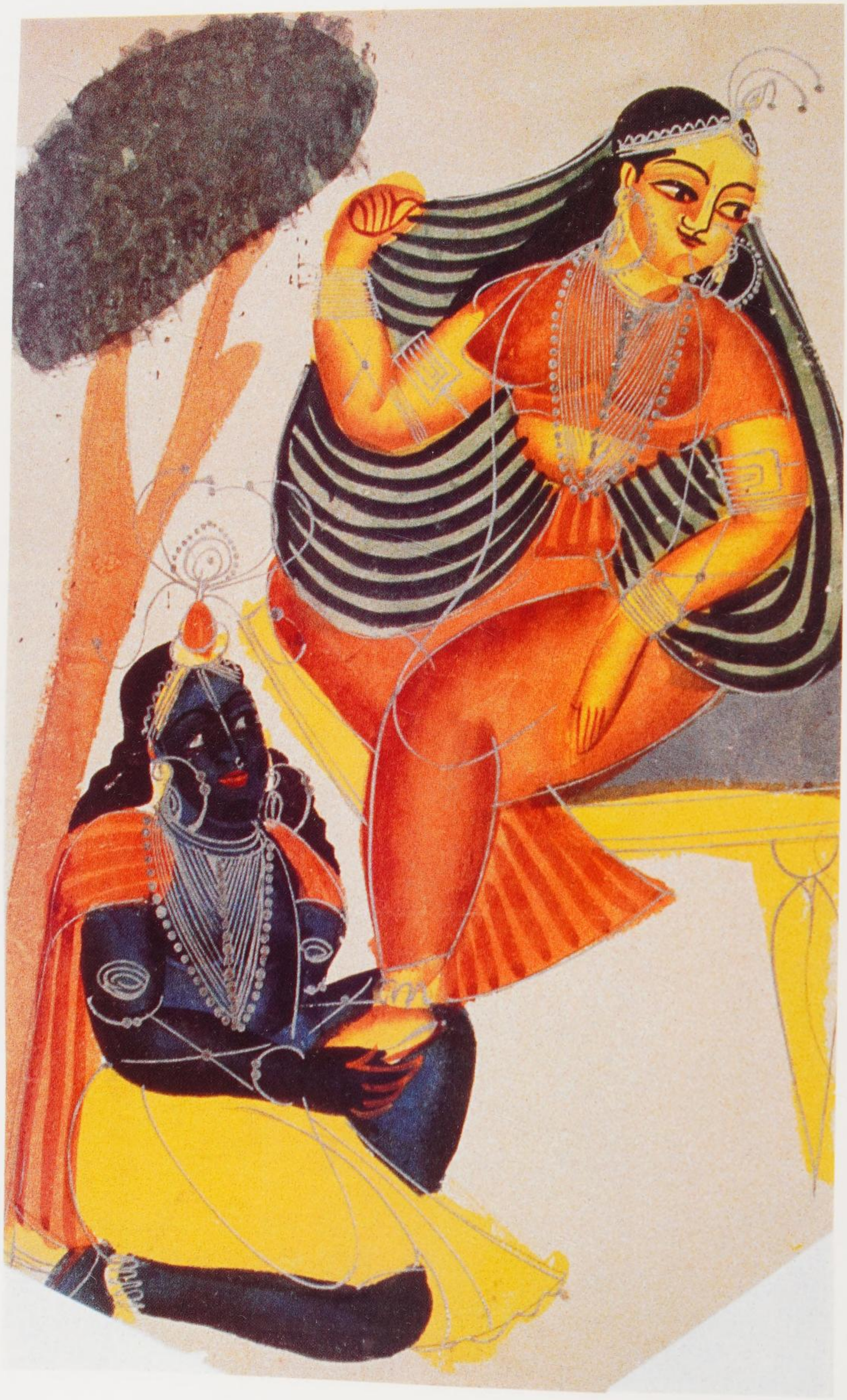

Fig. 81

Fig. 82

Fig. 83

Fig. 84

Fig. 81
Krishna Caressing Radha's Foot
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 167

Partially mollified by Krishna's cajolery and tender persuasion, Radha, sits radiating pride and dignity.

Fig. 82 (*see* page 214)
Barber Cleaning a Man's Ear
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 110

For a description of the archetypal image of a Calcutta dandy depicted here, *see* caption to Fig. 129.

Fig. 83 (*see* page 215)
Fake Ascetic
Kalighat painting
late 19th century or early 20th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 3368

Scandals in religious places must have been common in all times but with the introduction of the print-media and the rise of several reform movements in nineteenth century Bengal, religious imposters increasingly came under attack.

This painting, assigned to the artist Nibaran Chandra Ghosh (1835–1930), ridicules a roly-poly sadhu with conspicuous pigtail and a bird perched on his head.

Fig. 84.
Ganesha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 54

Fig. 85
Hanuman
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 11

Hanuman, the most ardent devotee of Rama, opens his chest to show the images of Rama and Sita enshrined in his heart.

In the Christian cultic concept 'Sacred Heart', the image of Christ represented in the form of his heart as an object of devotion, has been quite common. Popular pictures depicting the image of Christ within a heart-shaped form, widely in currency in the nineteenth century Calcutta may have been the source of this image of the monkey god.

The artist obviously enjoyed playing with the translucent quality of newly introduced watercolours when applying blue to Hanuman's body.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 86
Shiva
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 5

In one of the most characteristic examples of the Kalighat idiom, voluptuous Shiva, holding a drinking-horn, wearing his tiger skin loincloth, carrying his habitual shoulder-bag, and embellished with cobras, is shown seated on the ground prepared by the artist using the dab technique.

This is one of the best examples of conveying a sense of volume by employing a peculiar method of 'shading' that the Kalighat artists developed.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

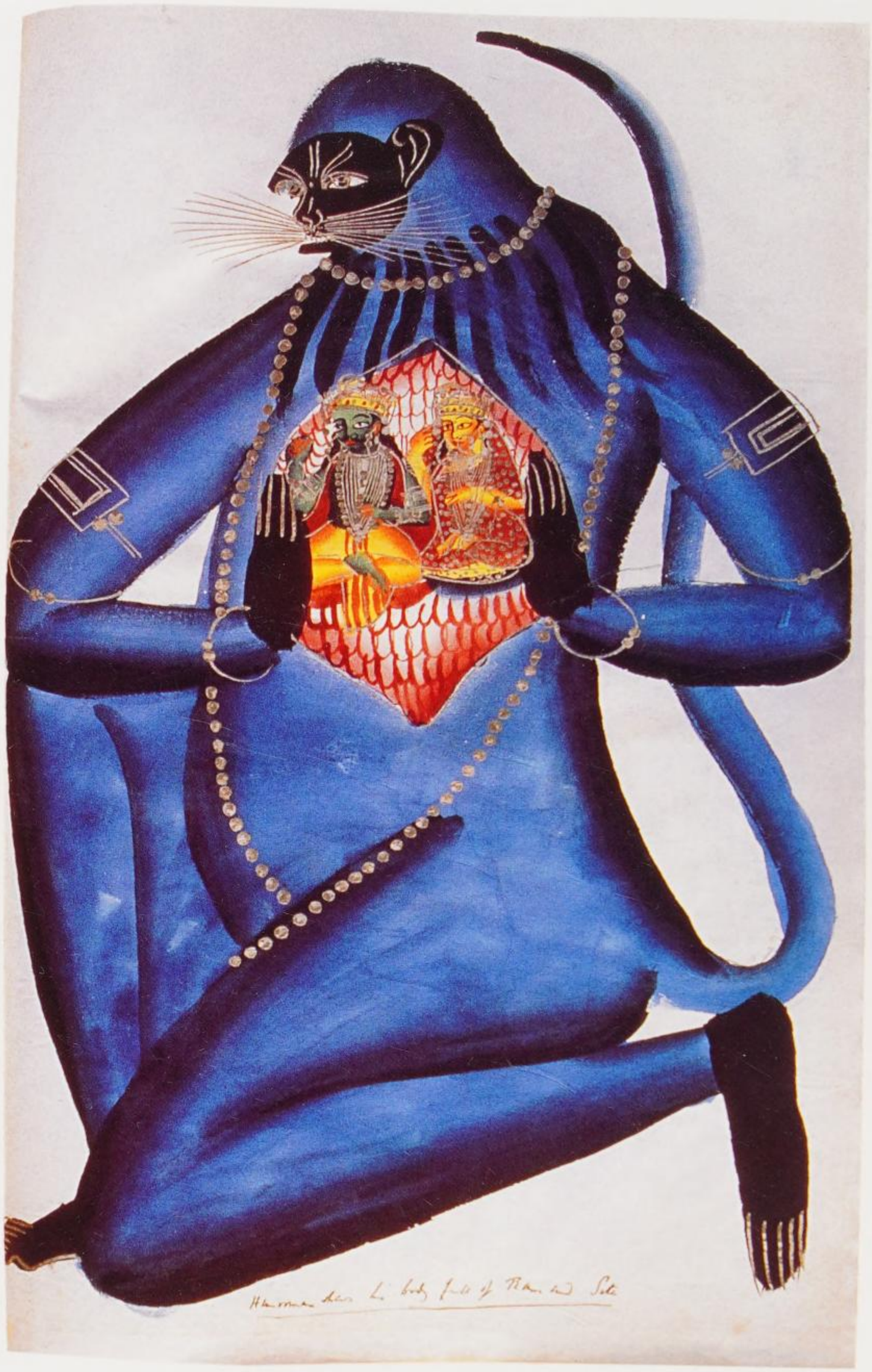

Fig. 85

careless mother, or a hoyden romping around shamelessly'.[92] It is not by chance that in the Kalighat type *pats*, gods and goddesses appear as ordinary mortals; members of next door middle-class families. It is unlikely that the artists who rendered the gods and goddesses as ordinary humans in their paintings of the time were unaware of the existence of the parallel oral tradition cited above, when constructing coextensive visual images moving in the same conceptual space.

The most charming examples of deities cast in the mould of home-loving, middle-class family men or housewives are offered by a series of Kalighat *pats*. Take for instance the painting depicting Shiva's outing with his family (Fig. 72). Casually dressed, Shiva, resembling a wayside shopkeeper, walks lovingly carrying the baby Ganesha in his

Fig. 86

Fig. 87

lap, held by his left hand and cosily seated on his pot-belly, followed by his wife Parvati decked up like any ordinary Bengali bride. It is remarkable how Shiva seeks to amuse the baby with his *damru* (drum), as if it was a child's rattle, and the way Parvati claps her hands in an attempt to pacify the baby who has half a mind to leap across to her. Fig. 73 has Shiva and Ganesha, the father and son, depicted in the same vein, and Fig. 74 depicts the round-the-corner wedding of Shiva, while Fig. 75, literally a 'picture' of marital bliss, depicts Shiva and Parvati as if proceeding on a honeymoon, and Fig. 76 recalls latter-day marriage anniversary photographs, complete with photo studio backdrop curtains at the top. A similar happy family posing for a photo appearance is captured in Fig. 77 where Vasudev and Yashoda are shown with baby Krishna, all looking outward.

Intoxicated Shiva, losing his tigerskin loincloth as he approaches Parvati or Annapura, is the subject of another painting (Fig. 78). In the hands of the Kalighat artists, Shiva 'came to be depicted as gawkish, hemp addict, forgetful of his slipping loincloth, and quite uninhibitedly unbarring his genitals.'[93]

Shiva's infatuation for Annapurna, expressed by his knee pressed against her, while nearly dropping his tigerskin loincloth in Fig. 78 is not very different in spirit from the flirtatious gesture of a

Fig. 87
Annapurna
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 52

Annapurna, the 'provider of grains' gives alms to Shiva, her consort. In Kalighat painting it is the goddess who is usually shown with a halo, not so much the male gods. Here the deities are shown gazing at the devotees. Annapurna's posture is that of a standardised female type which, with slight alteration, could also serve as Sita or Parvati.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 89

Fig. 88

Fig. 88
Hari–Hara
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 17

In this composite image of Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva), the former, in the characteristic tradition of Bengal, has been shown with a peacock feather crest and Krishna's nose ring. The merging of the tiger's tail of Shiva's loincloth with the pleated end of Vishnu's *dhoti* adds a humorous touch.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 90

Fig. 89
Durga Annihilating the Demon Mahisha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 9

Though the figure of Durga has been depicted conventionally and with the utmost care, it is in the treatment of the lion and the demon that the artist has shown courage and a boldness of approach. He has fully exploited the possibilities afforded by watercolour to achieve graded tones in a conscious play of water and pigment handled with a swiftly moving brush.

Fig. 90 (*see* page 216)
Manasa
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 40

Here Manasa, the snake-goddess, seated frontally and holding two snakes in her raised hands, is cast from the same mould of female image from which the goddess Lakshmi holding lotuses (*Fig.*92) is fashioned. Notably, the association of snakes with the goddess has been highlighted by replacing the legs of her throne with cobras.

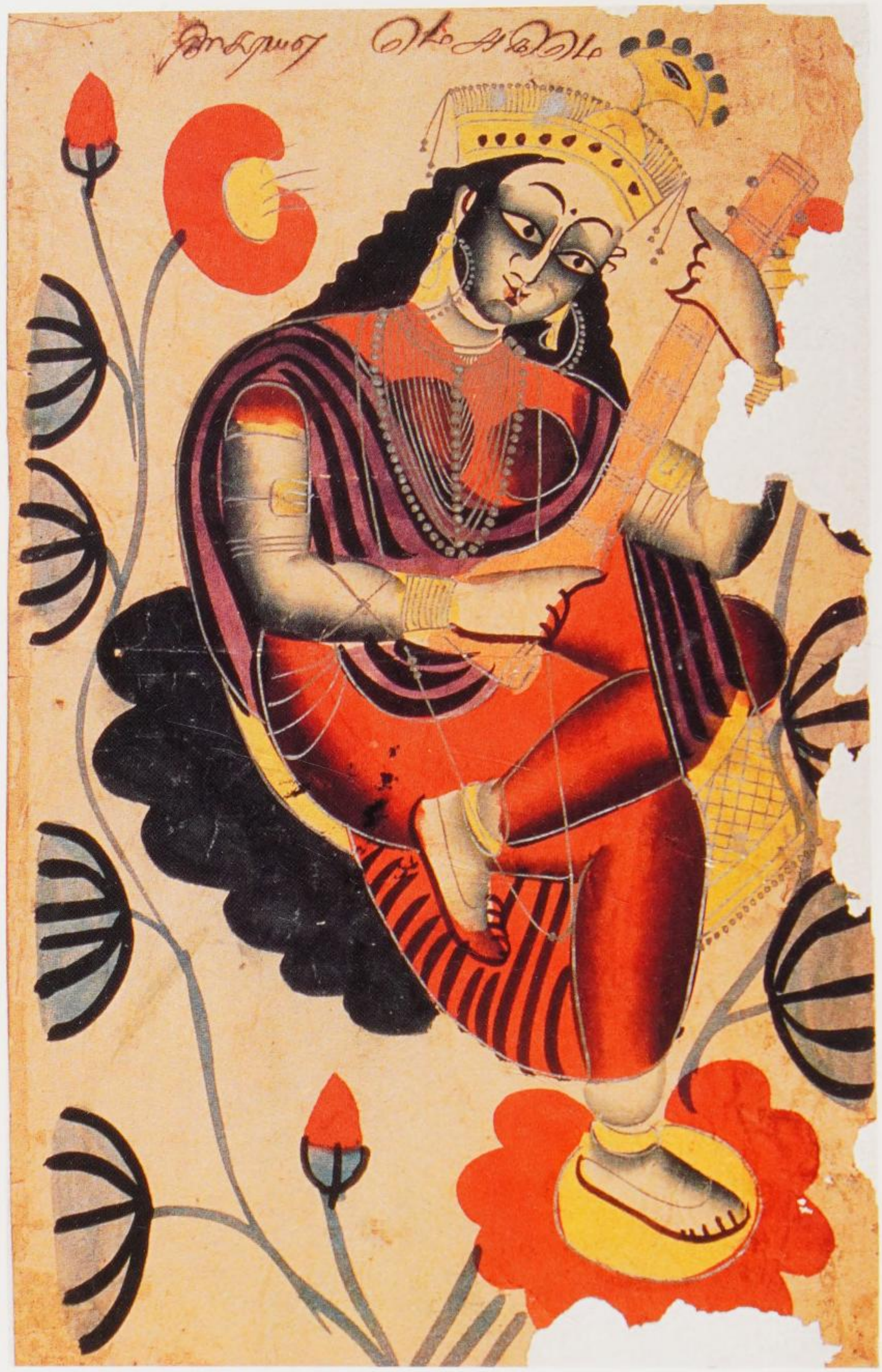

Fig. 91

middle-class Bengali babu made towards a fisherwoman in Fig. 79, in which the babu, while apparently negotiating the price for fish, enticingly strokes the hand of the youthful fish-seller who stares coyly at him. This frozen moment of the theatre of everyday life, complete with raised curtains on top, pre-empts several iconographic tableaux of deities in nineteenth century Calcutta.

Two paintings of Radha and Krishna (Fig. 80 and 81) graphically depict the changing scenario of male and female ascendancy. In Fig. 80 Radha, who looks like a teenaged wife, as tradition enjoins, sits humbly at her husband's feet, devoutly pressing them while Krishna sits looking tired and bored, like a middle-class husband who has just returned home from the day's work and expects his wife to comfort

Fig. 91
Sarasvati
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 10

Seated on a large lotus in a lotus pond, Sarasvati is depicted here playing a stringed musical instrument of the class of *tanpura*, *tambura*, or *vina*. Subsequently the image of the goddess came in handy to *patua*s in portraying the new bibi, heroine, or a courtesan (*see* Fig. 103, 104, and 106).

Fig. 92
Lakshmi
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 51

The four-armed goddess of plenty and prosperity has been enshrined on a lotus throne under an arch formed by the raised trunks of two elephants flanking her. The rapidly executed, impressionistic, almost abstract, elephants stem from a playfully wielded brush of an artist who appears to have been so intoxicated by the mere act of painting that the resultant form became almost secondary.

Fig. 93
Krishna Quelling the Serpent Kaliya
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 13

As Krishna triumphantly stands over the outspread hood of the dreaded serpent Kaliya who, according to legend, lived in one of the ponds of the river Yamuna, the two wives of the cobra pray to the deity to forgive and free their husband.

Here the artist has applied transparent blue over Kaliya's coils and the tails of his wives to represent water, a facility that became available with the introduction of watercolours.

Fig. 92

Fig. 93

him by pressing his feet. In contrast, in Fig. 81, Radha sits proudly on a high pedestal, seductively displaying her voluptuous breasts while Krishna, humbled by her charm, squats below her on the floor, admiring her foot. Both these themes have been celebrated in Indian love poetry and romantic painting of earlier times but in the Kalighat *pat*s they appear to acquire the overtones of the prevailing social values of the time and echo some of the *pat*s on the theme of lovers captioned 'male ascendancy' and 'female ascendancy' by W.G. Archer.[94]

Trendy and libertine babus often with their hair groomed in the Albert style, an expensive shawl thrown over their shoulders, and sporting buckled shoes, more concerned about the neatness of the pleats of their *dhoti* rather than their basic social obligations. One such is seated on a Victorian chair smoking a hookah while a barber is cleaning his ear (Fig. 82); lascivious landlords engaging themselves in lavish drink and dinner parties and erotic pleasure jaunts accompanied by salacious *khemta* dancers and other nautch girls; roly-poly religious hypocrites and fake sadhus (Fig. 83), were all as mocked and satirised in *jatra* and *swang* performances, in *kobi* and *panchali* songs as they were caricatured and lampooned by the Kalighat artists. The image of the deity was constructed in the image of man and whatever model of the latter was readily available in the society of the time was

Fig.94

Fig. 95

Fig. 94
Krishna Astride an Elephant Formed by *Gopi*s
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 4

According to one of the many versions of the story of Krishna, as he was leaving Mathura for Vrindavan, his beloved *gopi*s, who could not bear the separation, urged him not to go. Krishna mischievously suggested that they provide an elephant for his return journey. As the poor milkmaids could not afford to bring an elephant, they formed one by arranging themselves in the shape of the animal for Krishna to ride.

The tradition of constructing composite figures in Indian art is rooted in the depiction of multi-armed and multi-headed deities.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 95
Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 1

The painting is inscribed in Roman script: 'Queen Victoria', which may be in view of the British crown worn by the lady. Certain characteristic features such as a crowned female astride a horse, holding an unsheathed sword in her raised hand, and her Indian attire and posture of confidently holding the reins of her horse, tell us that this is a representation of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi. A virtually identical painting from the Pushkin Museum has been entitled 'Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi' (Knizkova, 1975: Pl. 10).

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which is belongs.

used as a prototype by the Kalighat artist. No wonder then that in such an environment the goddess Sarasvati played the violin, Shiva looked like a middle-class family man, and Kartika a Calcutta dandy in these paintings.[95] Thematically, the paintings of the Kalighat genre can be divided into two broad categories, i.e. religious and secular. The religious category would comprise paintings depicting images of deities such as Ganesha (Fig. 84), Hanuman (Fig. 85), Shiva (Fig. 86), Kartika, Annapurna (Fig. 87), Brahma, Harihara (Fig. 88), Krishna, Kali, Durga (Fig. 89), Manasa (Fig. 90), Sarasvati (Fig. 91), Lakshmi (Fig. 92), etc. or scenes from Hindu mythology as well as from the stories of Rama or the *lila*s of Krishna (Fig. 93 and 94). It is generally agreed that originally these paintings were created as cultic pictures to be carried home by pilgrims who visited Kalighat and other sacred sites in the city of Calcutta, and that their production preceded that of the so-

called secular pictures. On the other hand, the secular paintings included caricatures of babus and dandies, themes of male and female ascendancy, conjugal love and quarrels, portraits of dancers and musicians, portraits of historical figures such as Lakshmibai, the rani of Jhansi (Fig. 95), and depiction of contemporary social events (e.g. the Tarakeshwar affair), etc. The paintings of this class were carried home as souvenirs for their value as novelties or their didactic message.

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1 As detailed in Chapter 4, the hundred-year period in which Kalighat painting flourished can be approximately placed between 1830 and 1930.
2 W.G. Archer (1971: 4–5).
3 Hana Knizkova (1975: 22).
4 Ibid., 23.
5 Ibid.
6 Benoy Ghose (1981: 26).
7 Ibid.
8 T.N. Mukharji (1888: 20).
9 Ajit Ghose (1926: 98).
10 Binoy Bhattacharya in Sankar Sen Gupta (1973: 96).
11 Ibid., 95.
12 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 128).
13 Bireshwar Bandopadhyay (1978).
14 H.H. Risley (1891: 525).
15 Rabindra Nath Ganguli in Sankar Sen Gupta (1973: 124).
16 Sudhansu Kumar Ray in Census 1951 (1953: 313).
17 Rabindra Nath Ganguli op.cit., 124.
18 In Orissa, even today, the patachitra artists who paint on a canvas made of layered rags, use tamarind seed paste as a binder.
19 According to Pradyot Ghosh (1960: 16), Nibaran Chandra Ghosh and Kalicharan Ghosh, two brothers, died at ages 97 and 95 respectively. They belonged to the Sadgope (caste-Hindu) class and had migrated from Garia in 24 Parganas to Kalighat. For Nibaran Chandra's date *see* W.G. Archer (1953: 24); the incomplete paintings of this series are ascribed to Ghosh by Archer (1971, Fig. 80).
20 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 133–4).
21 Ibid., 130.
22 Sudhansu Kumar Ray in Census 1951 (1953: 316).
23 Ibid.
24 Bireshwar Bandopadhyay (1978).
25 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 124).
26 Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta in Sukanta Chaudhuri (1990: 331).
27 Benoy Ghose (1981: 45). Ghose further states that 'Krishnananda Agambagish of Nabadwip, the great tantric savant and scholar (c.1595–1675) sanctioned the image worship of Kali in his Tantrasar, and described in detail the constituents of the image that the modellers were to follow.
28 Benoy Ghose, op. cit., 45–6.
29 Prabhat Kumar Das in Sankar Sen Gupta (1973: 113–4).
30 Ibid., 113.
31 Ibid., 108–9.
32 Ibid., 110, 114–6.
33 Bholanath Bhattacharya in Sankar Sen Gupta (1973: 83).
34 T.N. Mukharji (1888).
35 Claude Levi-Strauss (1955: 524).
36 W.G. Archer (1971: 7).
37 R.P. Gupta in Sankar Sen Gupta (1990: 139).
38 Pradyot Ghosh (1969: 17).
39 Bholanath Bhattacharya, op. cit., 81.
40 For a detailed account of Kumortuli see BireshwarBandopadhyay (1978).
41 Bunny Gupta and Jaya Chaliha in Sukanta Chaudhuri (1990: 27).
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 28.
44 Pradyot Ghosh (1960: 17).
45 Benoy Ghosh, op. cit., 52).
46 The textile mills of Manchester and Birmingham pasted multicoloured oleographic labels on cloth bales exported to India.These, depicting Hindu gods and goddesses, were systematically collected, framed, and worshipped by the traders and agents of these mills in India. A large number of such framed labels have come into the market from banian homes in Shekhavati in Rajasthan.
47 Ilay Cooper (1994: 83).
48 Similar paintings bearing Tamil inscriptions form part of the Birla collection as well that of R.P. Gupta in Calcutta. According to R.P. Gupta, a southern Indian raja must have bought them by the cartload (personal correspondence with me). Since these include a few paintings depicting scenes of the Tarakeshwar affair, the lot can be dated to the early 70s of the nineteenth century.
49 Hana Knizkova (1975: 131).
50 Ibid.
51 The Kalighat collection of Monier Williams is in the Bodleian library.
52 Hana Knizkova, op. cit., 113–4.

53 Ibid., 117.
54 Pradyot Ghosh, op. cit., 29).
55 Binoy Bhattacharya, op. cit., 98. Bhattacharya, an eyewitness, records: 'After the independence again a movement was launched under the banner of Bangiya Chitrakar Unnayan Samiti for the social uplift of the Patuas. They made a representation to Mr. Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar, the then Minister-in-Charge of the Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Backward Communities to enroll them as Scheduled Caste. They also printed many leaflets to prove that they were the descendants of Visvakarma and once upon a time their position was high in the Hindu caste order. They also printed an appeal giving a clarion call to all Patuas to enroll themselves as Scheduled Caste Hindu during the census of 1951. There were many meetings and "Suddhi Yanga" under the leadership of Bharat Sevasram Sangha. I was present in one such"Yanga" in the village (Kumirmara) Amdabad in the district of Midnapur. After the performance there was a community dining and the Patuas were declared as the Hindus. After the ceremony many caste Hindus put their fingers into their throats and vomited. I heard similar reports from many places during my field work during this period. Later on when I visited Kumirmara in 1954 and in 1956, I found that the *Patua*s of that village remained socially in the same position as they were before.' However, at a community meeting, a section of the *patua*s argued 'that they would have to remain as low caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy while on the contrary they would enjoy equal social status in the Muslim community. I may mention here many *Patua*s who used to go to mosque during Id Festival secretly and at least 90% of the *Patua*s have had two names, one Hindu name and other a Muslim name' (p. 99).
56 Ibid., 100.
57 Pradyot Ghosh, op. cit., 13.
58 Benoy Ghose, op. cit., 75.
59 Sudhansu Kumar Ray, op. cit., 109.
60 Ibid.
61 For a more detailed analysis of the stylistic differences of the scroll paintings of Bengal see Kavita Singh (1994).
62 One of the exceptions is the series of paintings by *patua*s on the scandalous Tarakeshwar affair in which Elokeshi, the young wife of Nabinchandra Banerji was murdered by the latter on the ground of her suspected adulterous relationship with the Mahant of the Tarakeshwar temple in 1873. These are the only examples of sequential narrative within the Kalighat genre.
63 W.G. Archer, op. cit., 4–5.
64 B.N. Mukherjee in Indian Museum Bulletin (1984: 11).
65 Ibid., 8–9.
66 W.G. Archer, op. cit., 4).
67 Barring a couple of exceptions such as the Ramayana and the Krishna Lila scrolls from the Murshidabad area, dated to c. 1800, *see* Andrew Topsfield in Arts of Bengal (1979: 42), hardly any definitely datable scroll pre-dating paintings of the Kalighat idiom have come to light.
68 W.G. Archer, op. cit., 4–5.
69 Ibid., 8.
70 Both are in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum, 24 Parganas, West Bengal; Acc. nos. GM 1627 and GM 1695 respectively.
71 In the collection of the Gurusaday Museum; Acc. no. GM 1692.
72 In the collection of the Gurusaday Museum; Acc. no. GM 1698.
73 W.G. Archer, op. cit., 8.
74 Andrew Topsfield, op. cit., 36.
75 W.G. Archer (1971: 7–8).
76 T.Richard Blurton in A.L. Dallapiccola (1989: 437–8).
77 Ibid., 438.
78 Ibid.
79 Benoy Ghose, 98.
80 Ibid., 95.
81 Sudhansu Kumar Ray, op. cit., 327.
82 Ibid
83 Sarojit Datta (1993: 53); Sudhansu Kumar Ray, op. cit., 321; Binoy Bhattacharjee (1980: 105).
84 Sarojit Datta, op. cit., 55.
85 Sudhansu Kumar Ray, op. cit., 328; also see Benoy Ghose (1981: 96).
86 Sarojit Datta, op. cit., 55.
87 Sudhansu Kumar Ray, op. cit., 328.
88 Information courtesy Asis Chakravarti.
89 The Herwitz set ascribed to *sutradhar*s is distinctly different from the Kalighat paintings of the *patua*s so far known and published. As such, the term 'mainstream' is used for the known type as against the characteristic *sutradhar* variety.
90 *Ramayana of Valmiki* (rpt. 1985), Vol.III, 366.
91 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 78).
92 Ibid., 82.
93 Ibid., 142.
94 W.G. Archer, op. cit., Fig. 56–7.
95 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 129).

Fig. 98

Recasting the Imagery of Kalighat Painting

The Changing World of Calcutta

The society from which the artists of the Kalighat idiom drew resources in its initial phase was undergoing a major technological and cultural transformation, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the artists were quick to reflect this in their work. It is interesting that the traditions of miniature painting, as they flourished in Rajasthan and in the Punjab Hills or elsewhere under royal patronage, generally remained confined to limited conventional themes relating to Hindu mythology, court life, or celebrated love poetry popular in their times,[1] whereas Kalighat painting, that had its roots in the bazaar and grew under the patronage of the common man, continued to imbibe impressions from contemporary society at large and therefore, in this respect, did not become tame or derivative. The introduction of watercolour, photography, engraving, lithography, European-style theatre, art schools, universities, printing presses, Western manners, customs, and lifestyle, the expansion of trade and commerce, and advanced means of transport and communication generated new social conflicts and syntheses. They resulted in new measures of social status, an enormous turbulence in setting moral and ethical standards, a major change in aesthetic norms and, above all, massive proliferation of new visual imagery. The Kalighat painters not only survived all this but boldly reflected these upheavals in the pictorial conceptualisation of their work to become the first exponents of contemporary Indian art. This was the common man's art from the outset, and therefore absorbing social changes and commensurably recasting imagery came naturally to them. In this sense Kalighat painting was a moving mirror, moving forward in time, and moving around in the social and cultural space of the city, reflecting the shifting realities of both. With these changes, thematically the genre liberated itself from the narrow precincts of the normative religious iconography to expand into the world of contemporary social events, and in terms of formal painting construction, it moved out of the self-contained narrative or the drama of the participant characters, staged within the confine of its own rectangular picture frame, to flirt with the onlooker. The characters began to look out into the camera, stare at the audience, or establish a communion with the viewer with a more fixed and engaging gaze. The changed figuration, the drama and the ceremony of postures, the more definitely addressed gaze—often all this under a raised curtain—became characteristic features of Kalighat painting, particularly of the later phase, and owed much to the imagery of the proscenium stage and the photo studio that were just becoming popular. With the firm establishment of political power and consolidation of trade, commerce, and industry, the British began to set standards for evaluation of social status and cultural expression by transplanting their economic, civil, social, aesthetic, and moral

Fig. 98.
Maid Assisting a Lady in her Make-up
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 104

Shringar or a *nayika* making-up has been a popular subject in Indian miniature painting. The voluptuous bare-breasted woman holding a mirror in her hand could be a new bibi, a courtesan, or a heroine of a play or novel. *Rahasya Pratibha*, a nineteenth century novel, contained pictures of its heroine Saralata combing her hair (Knizkova, 1975: 68). More often than not, the attendants were shown in profile in Kalighat painting (*see Fig.* 82, 117, 118, and 176).

maxims to the colonial capital in the nineteenth century. The prime vehicles for the inculcation of these new values were the legislative, administrative, and legal fora, Western-style education through the medium of the English language which popularised new forms of the novel, drama, and poetry; technical schools, art academies, and art colleges that trained artisans (who were subsequently to lead Calcutta into the age of mechanical reproduction), and the élite (who were to be the 'fine artists' and in a sense the predecessors of the 'modern' Indian artist).

A formidable British presence in the city required the import of a wide paraphernalia of European objects of everyday use into Calcutta to maintain their closer-to-home lifestyle, and as the local gentry began to develop a taste for these, such imports began to assume commercial dimensions. Evidence shows that right at the beginning of the nineteenth century, ships carrying furniture, carriages, spectacles, ornaments, shoes, horse-caparisons, wines and liquors, and other luxury goods worth millions of rupees plied to Calcutta from Britain.[2] Already, towards the end of the eighteenth century Thomas Daniells goes on record to say that 'the commonest bazaar [in Calcutta] is full of prints—and Hodges' Indian Views are selling by cartloads.'[3] European imports were immediately copied, often suitably altered, giving birth to the so-called colonial Indian or Anglo-Indian style.

In architecture, the most impressive and monumental example of the baroque-neoclassical style that had become the most appreciated form of European architecture in Calcutta at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was represented by Wellesley's new Government House. The palatial architecture of the period, immediately following the construction of this building, was greatly influenced by it. The colonial architecture of Calcutta, in the nineteenth century became a mélange of styles varying from baroque, in all its variants, to neoclassical to Greek revival to neo-paladin to Gothic revival, but all these incorporating certain indigenous features such as a 'veranda to the southward' thrown in. 'Around this time, terms like *bungalow* and *veranda* emerge, indicating a new Anglo-Indian conception of architecture, despite a surface homage to the fashion at *home*.'[4]

In imitation of the ruling British masters, administrators, and bosses of large trading companies, the rich, Western-educated Bengali gentry began to adopt the lifestyle of the former. Adoption of Western and colonial manners and customs in all walks of life became the symbol of superior status, and a model for upward social mobility for the nouveau-riche Bengali grandee. The Bengali élite's quest for social propinquity with the British colonial settlers and their consciously distancing themselves socially from the local middle and lower classes, on the one hand, and the middle-class's sharp perception of the absurdities that arose from such pseudo-imitation of European social values, on the other, gave birth to a chain of new imagery that occupied the centre stage of Bengali literature, theatre, and the visual arts of the period, Kalighat painting being the clearest mirror of this

phenomenon. The Kalighat painters, as much as the *jatra* and *swang* performers, *kobis*, and street singers were quick to portray through their respective mediums, and with more than a tinge of sardonic mockery, the new images of foppish babus, trendy bibis, dimwit dandies, and seductive prostitutes, courtesans, singers, nautch girls, and actresses; the products of the new hybrid culture and lifestyle of the idle rich class of Calcutta.

By Victorian moral standards, the prevalent folk or popular culture of Calcutta, as articulated in *jatra* or *swang* performances, in street singing, *khemta* dances, or in Kalighat painting was 'indecent' and often 'abominable', 'shameful' and 'polluting'. Such performances were repeatedly criticised and ridiculed by the British intelligentsia. Anti-obscenity legislation enacted during this period directly attempted to curb the ethos of the cultural expression of the lower classes of the city. In 1873, several booksellers of the Battalla variety of books were arrested for selling *Vidya-Sundar*, one of the most popular literary works of the time on which innumerable *jatra* as well as Western-style theatrical performances were based.[5] As the currency of street culture was regarded as being debased by European audiences, the upper classes of Calcutta began to distance themselves from patronising them. The nineteenth century was also a period of recovery and reconstruction of the classical Indian historical and cultural tradition, having at its core, a central but vague agenda of Indian identity, which at the academic plane, in part, found expression in the great Orientalism discourse. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta has pointed out, 'the exclusiveness of the colonial art establishment was matched by the counter-exclusiveness of the nationalist art movement. As the new ideals of taste, beauty, and aesthetic refinement became central in the self identity of the Bengali middle-class, nationalism sought to supplant colonial practice with its own "high art".'[6]

One of the outcomes of this euphoric nationalist reconstruction of Indianness was a movement towards massive 'Sanskritisation' of the Bengali language and literary taste. In the sphere of art it meant turning away from the folk traditions and turning to 'the court paintings of the Mughal and Rajput days'.[7]

The lacuna created by the Bengali intellectuals' denouncement of the indigenous folk cultural expressions was partly filled by the adoption of European manners and institutions, and was partly to be made up by a quest for India's own lost but now revived classicism which, among other manifestations, led to 'depiction of Hindu mythological characters in the image of Greek gods and goddesses, but dressed in Indian clothes—the heroes in semi-Mughal attire and the heroines draped in the Bengali sari'.[8]

This resort to hybrid classicism, typical of the age, generated a flood of translations of Sanskrit plays into Bengali and their being staged on the proscenium stage with characters dressed up as Rajput and Mughal princes, princesses, and courtiers.

Bibis, Heroines, and Courtesans: The Female Image in Kalighat Painting

The prevailing upper class notions of morality and the resultant crystallisation of attitude towards single women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta did not leave much room for differentiation between prostitutes, courtesans, nautch girls, heroines of novels and plays, or theatre actresses. They were all 'public women', i.e. belonging to the category of prostitutes. It is however interesting that the disposition of the European collectors of Kalighat painting of the time, as well as that of several later scholars on the subject, on this matter, was not very different either. They have labelled all Kalighat paintings depicting women (other than goddesses) 'courtesan': 'courtesan with rose and mirror', 'courtesan trampling on lover', 'courtesan nursing a peacock', 'courtesan dressing her hair', et al.[9] At least two paintings of this type in British collections bear such inscriptions as 'Public woman'[10] and 'Bengali woman public'.[11] In all probability, these were inscribed by the collectors themselves. As we shall see below, there is no strong evidence within the paintings themselves to establish the identity of these women as 'courtesans' or 'public women'. On the contrary, there is much more contextual corroboration available to show that many of these women may have represented theatre heroines or bibis (the female counterparts of babus and dandies), or *nayika*s (women in the sundry amorous moods described in Sanskrit and other regional poetry).

As far as the labelling 'Courtesan' or 'Public Woman' is concerned, it must be added here that though a majority of the nineteenth and early twentieth century actresses of the Bengali theatre came from among the prostitutes,[12] many had attained the status of renowned celebrities of their time. The authors of these labels appear to have either been oblivious of the fact that some of these women may have represented popular heroines, paintings of whom were objects of desire by the public at large, or that they had foremost in their minds the courtesan background of the women and therefore underplayed their identity as actresses/heroines.

It must also be recalled that, apart from minor variations of certain iconographic attributes, the postures and gestures as well as the general figuration and clothing of these women in Kalighat painting were not very different from those of the goddesses and divine consorts. In terms of pictorial conceptualisation they belonged to one or another of the few established female types. As the basic female types in these paintings got defined through the images of goddesses, there was the least need to convey a physical likeness to an actual living model. This convention of portraying conceptually rather than realistically continued as the artists began to portray women, whether courtesans or heroines. Unlike the goddesses, the courtesans and heroines did not have particular religious emblems or attributes. They were idealised as sensuous 'public women' and as long as this feature was evidenced, it was possible that the painting of one heroine could very well substitute for another. The convention of reproducing the same painting of an idealised sensuous woman in

different contexts was also regularly followed by the Bengali theatre magazines of the first quarter of the twentieth century,[13] and Battala book illustrations too adhered this practice. For example, an engraving depicting a woman reclining on the floor against a large bolster with a markedly seductive gaze and a posing for a picture look, often noticed in some Kalighat portraits, was once published as 'Vidyar Pratimurti' in 1873–4 and subsequently as 'Rani Sarat Sundarir Pratimurti' in 1878 in the Battala books.[14] Considering the striking similarities that existed between some of the Kalighat paintings and the Battala engravings, the mutual influences that both shared and the fact that the periods of practice of both disciplines in the main coincided, it can be said with certitude that if the women of the engravings were identified by people with certain heroines, the same may have been true, to a certain degree, of the corresponding Kalighat variants.

It is not so much the intention here to establish a one-to-one parity between the portraits of the 'secular' women of Kalighat painting and the stage heroines as they were or as they appeared in other mediums, as to underline the possible evocation of the performative context by the artists of the Kalighat genre. As the artist was mapping the swift transformations of the urban society of the Calcutta of his times, he was learning its language and adopting its metaphors. Theatre was among the major vehicles of visual impact and the new image of the male and female that it broadcast had to be immediately captured by these artists as their idiom of painting had been nurtured in the street, and it was this that it had freely reflected. Had it not been so, these women would not have entered the space of the Kalighat artists.

That is not to say that the flourishing courtesan culture in the Calcutta of the time had not played a significant role in the formalisation of the image of the new stylish woman in Kalighat painting, or that some of the portraits may not have represented courtesans. Indeed, the growth of prostitution in nineteenth century Calcutta had assumed enormous proportions. By one estimate, in 1867 the city had 30,000 prostitutes in a population of about 400,000.[15] Both Chitpur and Kalighat had formidable settlements of *chitrakaras* and *patuas*, and both had the city's most celebrated red-light areas in the vicinity. It must be mentioned here that the painters had observed the courtesan 'as a vast rotund woman, waving a rose, holding a mirror, dressing her hair, toying with a hookah or lazily asleep.'[16] Moreover, as has been mentioned above, often theatre actresses came from the prostitute quarters,[17] and in the social environment of the time, their 'public women' status and their musical skills and talents acquired as prostitutes facilitated their entry into the theatre.

The Kalighat painters, while conceptualising the new female icon, must have derived elements from all these manifestations of the new woman seen around them. It should not then surprise us that certain contemporary pictorial conventions evolved for portraying a courtesan were reused in an altered form in conceptualising the image of a theatre heroine (and vice versa), and that the same

Fig. 96

Fig. 96
Portrait of a Woman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 61

A virtually identical painting in the IOL collection has been inscribed 'Public woman', probably by its nineteenth century collector. Hana Knizkova (1975: 68) has drawn attention to similar engravings published as Vidya of the play *Vidya Sundar*, which opens up the possibility of such portraits representing heroines of plays and not always courtesans. Rippled curtains on top highlight the theatrical connection. *Fig.* 102 represents a comparable female type which has been published in sundry literary works illustrating Rajakanya Sandhyabati or Leila.

Fig. 97
Portrait of a Woman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 211

The painting does not depict an identifiable courtesan or a heroine but a universalised sensuous female type which could be fitted into virtually any context where a woman as an object of desire was to be represented.

painting entitled Vidya in one context should appear as Sarat Sundari in another. Our concern here, as we interpret the portraits of women in Kalighat paintings, would be to identify the codes of representation practised by the artist without probing the ambivalence that they had so consciously infused in their works.

Against the background of the wider, composite cultural evidence of the time available today, let us examine a few portraits of 'secular' women as they were depicted in Kalighat painting. For this let us take seven paintings from a single series of the Herwitz collection (Fig. 96, 97, 99, 103, 111, 114, and 117), to interpret certain special codes of representation and see how a part of the series may have been concerned with portraying heroines of novels and plays or popular theatre actresses. This does not preclude the possibility of some of them also serving as representations of courtesans and vice

Fig. 97

versa. As we have seen earlier, this conscious ambivalence and the possibility of such mutual transference was more a rule than an exception in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta.

Before examining the seven paintings in turn, a few words need to be said about their belonging to a single series, not only thematically but also in terms of their pictorial execution and stylistic unity. The two most striking features that bind these paintings into a single series are that all the seven women depicted here are 'secular' (i.e. not goddesses) and that, apart from slight variations, each is clad in a fancy sari with the same design and colour scheme, i.e. white field marked by a diaper of dotted trefoil pattern, with double band borders in red and blue. It is also notable that all these paintings come from a single album.[18] Two paintings from the IOL collection (published Knizkova, 1975, Fig. 42, 43) show women, both belonging to the 'secular' category and not to those of goddesses or divine consorts, sporting the same sari. To my knowledge, there are hardly any paintings of goddesses or divine consorts within the Kalighat genre in which they were shown wearing such an unconventional, freakish sari.[19] The goddesses, divine consorts, and married women (like Elokeshi) were generally shown clad in plain red saris and occasionally in plain deep blue ones.

The typical white sari with dotted designs and typical borders, unseen till then, and now found worn by 'secular' women striking different seductive poses in these apparently later Kalighat paintings, bespeaks a new fashion of the time in its acceptance of the prerogative of theatre actresses (among other single professional women, including courtesans), who nevertheless 'lacked the identity of any particular patrilinear genealogy'[20] and paintings of whom were to be 'invested with the playgoers emotional and physiological memory of erotica (if any)'.[21] Indeed, some of the painted illustrations accompanying articles on theatre actresses published in the theatre journals of the early twentieth century continued to depict women (meant to represent generalised romantic images of actresses), wearing white saris with the same three-dot pattern (as found in Fig.103 and 111) and thereby perpetuated the language of certain symbols so crystallised.

Other stylistic features and thematic characteristics of the series include their sketchy workmanship, scanty 'shading' in light tones emphasising the fair complexion of the women (an ideal of feminine beauty that continues to prevail as matrimonial ads testify), the general typology and manner of executing ornaments, typical hairstyles marked by heavy locks of curly hair falling over the cheeks, heightened sensuality emphasised by semi-covered or bare breasts and arms, together with an alluring gaze.

Since these are features common to all the seven paintings, it would appear that all of them were the works of the same hand and the artist was consciously painting a series of women belonging to a definite iconic category, and because some of the contemporary or later engraved companion pieces of these paintings had served to

depict the heroines of certain novels and plays, these might be the women the artist was also portraying in the series in question.

Let us begin with Fig. 96. It shows a woman sitting cross-legged with folded hands on an austere pink floor and against an equally austere off-white wall, suggesting a locale. She leans against a large oval bolster. A hookah is placed on her left. The woman is clad in the same white sari referred to above, with the dotted pattern all over and a red and blue ornate border. Her right breast is partially exposed. Her steady gaze and stiff pose are conscious of a camera or a theatre audience or an indulgent viewer; perhaps a potential fan. Rippled curtains on top complete the setting. Another version of this picture is in the IOL collection[22] and is inscribed 'public woman', indicating that it was interpreted as portrait of a prostitute by the collector. An engraving inscribed 'Vidya', datable to 1868 (the possibility of an earlier engraving of this type is undeniable), published in the compendium of works of the poet Bharatchandra, which includes the popular story of Vidya and Sundar, depicts a female figure that bears a close resemblance to those depicted in the two Kalighat paintings just mentioned.[23] This engraving provides a clue to decoding similar figures depicted in Kalighat pictures as Vidya, the heroine of the much staged Bengali play *Vidya Sundar*.

From folk *jatra* to the proscenium stage, *Vidya Sundar* served as the most popular theme of the theatrical performances of the time. The story centred around the love affair between Vidya and Sundar. Vidya, a beautiful and scholarly princess of Burdwan had made it known all over the land that she would offer her hand in marriage to anyone surpassing her in knowledge. Sundar, the prince of Kanchipuram, accepted the challenge, and lured by Vidya's famed beauty and intellect, undertook a journey to Burdwan in disguise. Notwithstanding many hurdles, he met Vidya, fell in love with her, and secretly married her.

The popularity and iconisation of theatre actresses had already begun in the first half of the nineteenth century. A reviewer commenting on a 1835 staging of *Vidya Sundar* was wholly enchanted by the role of Vidya played by Radha Moni, a sixteen-year-old girl, who 'filled the mind of the audience with rapture and delight' and 'who made such a capital figure on the stage'.[24] An elderly woman Jaya Durga appeared in a 'double-role', i.e. that of the Rani, Vidya's mother, and of Malini, the flower seller, while another woman Raj Kumori played the part of Vidya's maidservant.[25] It should not therefore be a surprise that many admirers of these heroines and actresses should want to possess their pictures, and the Battala publishers and Kalighat painters were quick to respond to the need.

Several other such comparisons between the nineteenth and early twentieth century engravings and Kalighat paintings further hint that the women portrayed in these paintings might have represented some of the renowned actresses of the theatre of the time in the form of idealised versions of the characters played by them on the stage. This would also account for a certain measure of theatricality that is

visible in the pictorial conceptualisation of female figures in the Battala engravings and Kalighat paintings.

Let us look at another painting, Fig. 97, from the same series. Here a woman is seen seated on a Victorian chair combing her long tresses. Besides evoking a reference to similar *nayika*s, often depicted in Indian sculpture and painting, thematically it strongly resembles a painting in the Pushkin Museum collection and another in the IOL collection (published Knizkova, 1975: Pl. 27 and 40 respectively). Hana Knizkova has drawn our attention to the fact that a counterpart of this painting was published to portray Saralata, the heroine of the novel *Rahasya Pratibha* by Upendra Chandra Mitra.[26] Significantly, both the Pushkin and IOL paintings show raised curtains on top. The woman is cast in the mould of a traditional *nayika* (sans the Victorian chair) or a heroine of a play or a sitter in a photo studio (with the Victorian chair). It is most likely that the Kalighat paintings of this typology, and the related engraving published in *Rahasya Pratibha*, were not created to depict Saralata but represented an image of an idealised heroine type (also *see* Fig. 98) that could fit multiple situations as 'an inbuilt promiscuity in the close proximity of unrelated material'[27] and that this was common practice in the creation and consumption of female imagery at the time.

Fig. 99, also of the seven women series, shows a woman squatting on the floor holding a flower in her hand. Varying counterparts of this theme occur frequently in Kalighat painting as well as in the engraved book illustrations of the time. A painting in the IOL (published Knizkova, 1975: Pl. 38) shows a half-length portrait of a woman holding a flower. Fig. 100 has a woman caressing a peacock with her left hand while holding a flower in her right. Renderings of a woman leading the 'sheepish lover'[28] on a leash with one hand and holding a rose in another (Fig. 101), and those of Elokeshi holding a flower while in the company of the Mahant of Tarakeshwar, too, are a part of this general pictorial type. In several Battala book illustrations, lovelorn Sundar, when suffering the pangs of separation from his beloved Vidya, is often shown seated or standing holding a flower. One such engraving shows Rajakanya Sandhyabati, the heroine of the story of Bara Satya Pir, holding a bunch of flowers when sitting on the floor leaning against a large oval bolster beneath the backdrop of a photo studio or billowing curtains akin to those in the theatre. The woman's posture of holding the flowers in her right hand is demonstrative (Fig. 102).

Fig. 99
Portrait of a Woman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 186

Images of women striking seductive poses had become objects of desire, for permanent possession and consumption, in nineteenth century Calcutta.

The romantic context of a man or a woman holding a flower, signifying separation from or awaiting the loved one, may be clear from these various examples, but none of them indicate that the women in question are necessarily courtesans. Indeed, the examples referred to above of engravings of Sandhyabati or Vidya or Sundar holding flowers, or of Kalighat paintings depicting Elokeshi seated on a Victorian chair holding a flower in her hand when being seduced by the Mahant (or seducing him), or that of a *nayika* with peacock holding a flower in her hand, bring them closer to heroines and *nayika*s of plays and novels. Fig. 99 can also be interpreted as belonging to such a class.

Fig. 99

Fig. 100

Fig. 101

Fig. 102

Fig. 103 shows a woman squatting on the floor playing a *sitar* or *tanpura*, and Fig. 104 is similar in conception. Typologically these women share commonalties with the depictions of goddess Sarasvati playing the *veena* in Kalighat painting as much as with those of fashionable bibis seated on Victorian chairs in the guise of playing a musical instrument. Interestingly, the instrument resembling a *sitar* has f-holes not commonly found in Indian musical instruments and appears to derive from the violin (Fig. 105). Later Kalighat paintings depict not only a modish woman playing the violin, but often Sarasvati's *veena* is replaced by a violin. A painting in the V & A collection depicts Krishna disguised as a woman playing a violin for Radha.[29] Both courtesans and theatre actresses were adept in singing and playing musical instruments: in the former case these were necessary to entertain their customers while in the latter 'their singing and dancing talents were well suited to the kind of *geetinatya*s (song and dance based plays) that were in vogue. 'These were all plays centred on the heroine and, with the advent of the actress, proved to be instant box-office draws.'[30]

Fig. 106 depicts a woman with neatly groomed hair, elaborately clothed (wearing even a blouse), sporting pointed buckled shoes in the European style, seated on a Victorian chair and playing (posing as

Fig. 100.
Anangamanjari, Love–Smitten *Nayika*
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 85

See caption to Fig. 111.

Fig. 101.
Victim of a Charmer
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 132

See caption to Fig. 171.

Fig. 102.
Rajakanya Sandhyabati or Leila
Battala engraving, engraved by Kartikchandra Basak
Bengali era 1345

Private Collection

Fig. 103
Woman Playing Music
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 117

The fancily apparelled heroine or courtesan is shown posing with (rather than actually playing) an Indian musical instrument with f-holes. Sarasvati playing the *veena*, Shiva playing a *tanpura*, a dandy with a posing for a picture appearance, holding a musical instrument (while seated on a Victorian chair) are all images that stemmed from the changing cultural milieu of nineteenth century Calcutta.

Fig. 104 (see page 217)
Woman Playing Music
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 3367

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept, *see* captions to Fig. 103 and 106.

Fig. 105
Sarasvati Playing the Violin
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Water colour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, C 20

Under the European influence prevalent in the nineteenth century, not only were the Indian musical instruments of the class of *sitar*, *tanpura*, *tambura* depicted in Kalighat painting with f-holes, but the new excitement created by the European musical instruments led to such representations as Krishna as Kali playing the violin to Radha, or Sarasvati abandoning her conventional *veena* in favour of a violin.

Also see caption to *Fig.* 103.

Fig. 103

Fig. 104

Fig. 105

Fig. 106

playing) the *sitar*. A painting in the IOL (Fig. 107) depicts the exact male counterpart of the woman shown here. A similar one in the Pushkin collection is inscribed 'babu' (Knizkova, 1975: Pl. 28). As such, the Herwitz female can be inferred to represent a bibi. From the profusion of similar other late-nineteenth century Kalighat paintings as well as painted photographs and *kantha* embroideries [(Fig. 108) (a)] showing male or female figures seated on Victorian chairs posing as *sitar* players, it becomes evident that 'cultivation of classical Indian music was common among the Calcutta aristocratic families ... Ustads from North India were patronised by these families in their ancestral houses and they taught the Bengali music lovers of the city'.[31] These particular images, in all probability, represented babus and bibis as they were or as they were represented on the stage.

In the NM Collection, Prague, there is a painting of a Bengali babu playing the *sitar*, which is datable to the early 1870s on the basis of its acquisition around that time.[32] Fig. 107, from the IOL, can also be dated to the same period. In terms of general picture construction—the posture of sitting cross-legged on a Victorian chair, the pose of playing the *sitar*, dressing up as a dandy complete with the Albert hairstyle, large earrings, fancy shawl, and buckled shoes—these paintings come quite close to the mannerisms of photographic portraiture that became popular in India from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A painted photograph of a *sitar* player (Fig. 109) shows the subject, also seated on a Victorian chair, holding his *sitar* as if playing, all decked up for a snap, looking directly into the camera. Undoubtedly, early Indian photographic portraiture has used painters' mannerisms and the painters have in turn been influenced by photographic stylisation. The artists of the Kalighat genre appear to be imbibing all these influences from the changing urban scenario around them and casting and recasting their characters accordingly. Referring to photography in this period, Judith Mara Gutman says:

> A new generation of artists, living from the 1880s on ... used those richer tensions to create a new realm of portraiture. They adhered to principles of portraiture, as Coomaraswamy expressed, 'that the man ... not as he was seen on earth but as he was in himself' was to be at the core of likeness.[33]

The Kalighat paintings of the *sitar*-playing babus and bibis belong to this class of paraphernalia-centred portraits.

Photography was not only introduced into Calcutta by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century but by 1860 there were nearly 130 Bengali photographers in Calcutta and about 200 European ones.[34] If the roving eye of the Kalighat painter did not miss theatre curtains, Victorian chairs, the mannerisms of courtesans and actresses, the lifestyle of babus and bibis, contemporary social scandals as well as the European paintings that flooded the market, there was no reason for them to miss the prints produced by photo studios. Kalighat painting has been described as: 'Bazaar painting'; equally, it was the 'bazaar [that] provided the necessary environment for the "cultivation" of photography in India ... bazaar life kept an Indian vision alive ... it also established an audience for photography ... nobles used bazaar

Fig. 107

Fig. 106
Woman Playing Music
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 197

'Public women', whether courtesans or theatre actresses, required a talent for and skill in music. The picture of a man or a woman playing a musical instrument had so fired the imagination of Calcuttans that these were churned out by the dozen in paintings, engravings, embroidery (*Fig.* 108 a) or photography (*Fig.* 110). Photo studios maintained at least a dilapidated *sitar* ready to hand to satisfy a potential sitter's demand for a picture of him posing with the instrument.

Here, a spruce, Westernised upper-class lady is shown seated on a Victorian chair ready to be 'shot' with a stringed musical instrument in her hands.

Fig. 107 (see page 218)
Man Playing Music
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 1877

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept, *see* caption to *Fig.* 109.

Fig. 108 (a)

Fig. 108 (b)

Fig. 109

Fig. 108 (a)
Images from a *Kantha* Embroidery (Detail)
Cotton thread on cotton ground, end of 19th century or beginning of 20th century.
Collection: Jutta Jain-Neubauer

Popular images from British school textbooks, biscuit tins, cigarette packets, postcards, playing cards, or oleographs exerted great influence on the artists and craftsmen of the late nineteenth century.

In the detail reproduced here one sees an embroidered illustration of Urvashi being supplicated by Pururvas not to go away; the image is from a postcard in circulation at least in 1904 (*see Fig.* 108 b). Interestingly, an image of a woman sitting on a Victorian chair playing a *sitar*, as was often depicted in Kalighat painting, has also found a place in the same piece, illustrating the fact that a hoard of new popular icons of British India had fully charged the imagination of the artists and craftsmen of the time.

Fig. 108 (b)
Urvashi
Postcard, postal seal bearing the date 19 Dec. 1904
14 x 9 cm
Collection: Jutta Jain-Neubauer

See caption to *Fig.* 108 (a)

Fig. 109
Man Playing a *Sitar*
Painted photograph, c. 1885
Photographer unknown, 15 x 10 cm
Collection: AIIS

Photographic portraits in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced the markedly outward directed gaze of the sitter in the graphic arts of the period. When posing, certain props such as a *sitar*, and a hookah, or a side table with a flower vase or books came handy to lend the sitter a sense of dignity and helped the photographer to compose his picture.

Fig. 110
'Lady with Guitar'
Picture postcard
Gobind Ram & Ooday Ram
Jaipur, early 20th century.
From a photograph, 9 x 14 cm
Collection: Jutta Jain-Neubauer

The picture postcard is interestingly captioned: 'Lady with Guitar'. Since the instrument was only meant to be held by a sitter and not played, it did not matter whether it was a guitar or a *sitar*. Posing for a photograph holding a musical instrument was fashionable in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Also *see* caption to *Fig.* 103 and 106

Fig. 111

photographer[s] ... it slipped photography into an Indian social structure, giving it a place, role and function.'[35]

Certain frozen moments capturing highly symbolic gestures of courtesans, actresses, and fashionable dandies, their contrived postures and fixed gazes, their manner of sitting cross-legged on European chairs (one hand resting on the arm of the chair), and their demonstrative display of all that was to be 'recorded', i.e. the pleats of their *dhoti*s, their expensive shawls, buckled shoes, hookahs, a flower in one hand, or their ability to play a musical instrument, all bespeak an idiom and imagery informed by photography. Interestingly, photographic portraits, especially of celebrities, in the form of cartes-de-visite had attained a degree of popularity in Calcutta in the early 1860s. Around that time Dahlmeyer and Ross lenses, along with Vallantine twin lenses for cartes-de-visite were available in Calcutta.[36] Among others, Bourne & Shepherd and Johnson & Hoffmann of Calcutta specialised in the job:

> This established the fashion of collecting the cartes-de-visite of celebrities, as well as of one's friends and preserving these albums ... photographs of celebrities soon started being sold at stationary shops, just as picture postcards are today ... public demand often compelled photographers to publish cards based on earlier photographs, paintings and even engravings. [37]

Several such cartes-de-visite and picture postcards portray the

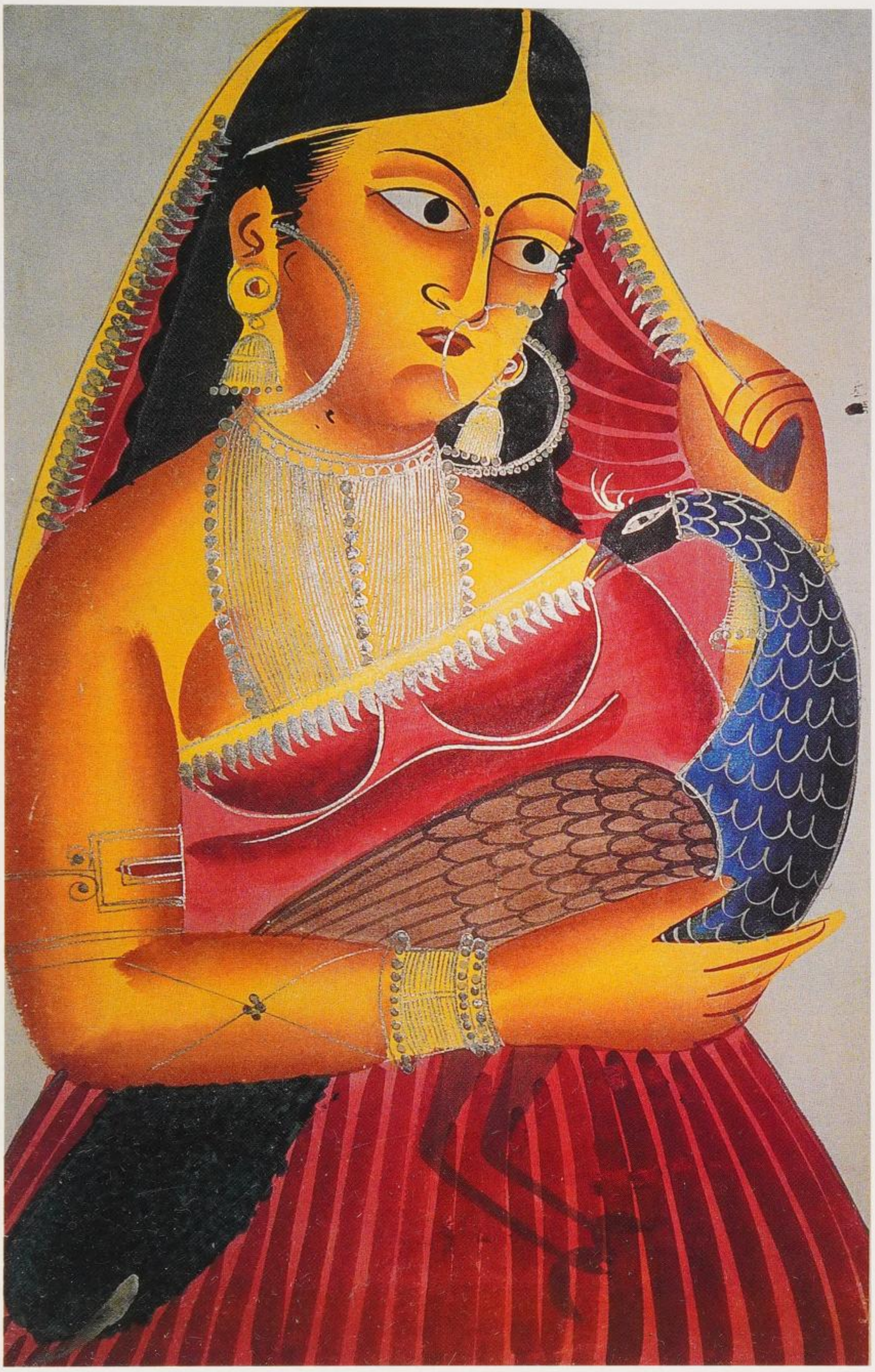

Fig. 112

sitter holding a flower or hookah in his/her hand or playing a musical instrument (Fig. 110), and in this respect appear to bear generic connections with the Kalighat paintings and Battala engravings of the portrait category. This is interesting because the majority of such paintings are from the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth, a period coinciding with that of the popularity of cartes-de-visite and picture postcards of celebrities.

The fifth of the seven women's series from the Herwitz collection (Fig. 111) represents a woman seated cross-legged on a European chair, holding a peacock in her left hand. Conceptually, the

Fig. 111
Nayika with a Peacock
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 102

Often erroneously described as 'courtesan nursing a peacock', the woman here apparently represents a *nayika* or heroine longing for her lover to arrive, a theme much celebrated in medieval Indian love poetry and the miniature paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

However, the change from the medieval depiction of the theme to one set in nineteenth century Calcutta is marked by contemporary make-up and of seating the *nayika* on a European style chair.

Fig. 112
Nayika, Heroine with a Peacock
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 1876

This half-length portrait of a *nayika* is comparable to the nineteenth century woodcut (*see* Fig. 113) entitled 'Anangamanjari'. The rigid stylisation of the image, in all its variations, is testimony to its iconic status.

Also *see* caption to Fig. 111

Fig. 113

Fig. 113
Alanga–Manjari
Engraving by Gobindachandra Roy,
Calcutta, 19th century.
Black-and-white print.
Private Collection

See caption to Fig. 111.

painting resembles Fig. 100 (except that here the woman holds a flower in her right hand), and thematically it greatly resembles the half-length portrait of a woman holding a peacock in the IOL collections (Fig. 112) and Pushkin (published Knizkova: 1975, Pl. 9). W.G. Archer[38] has published a similar painting from the V & A and has entitled it 'Courtesan nursing a peacock'. A monochrome woodcut engraved by Gobindachandra Roy of Dhaka, who in all probability lived in the late nineteenth century, depicts a half-length portrait of a lady with a peacock that is inscribed '*Alanga-Manjari*', a corrupt form of the Sanskrit *ananga-manjari*, meaning 'She who blooms in love', *ananga* ('without body') being one of the appellations of Kamadeva or the god of love (Fig. 113). The portrait represents a *nayika* or a heroine in love, a variety of whom are described in Indian erotic poetry, each representing a different mood and identifiable by specific iconographic features. Clearly the motif of 'Woman and Peacock' represents the *kakubha* type of *ragini*[39] and not a courtesan. There are no particular references to courtesans' association with the peacock.

It is significant that the woodcut by Gobindachandra Roy mentioned above is framed by curtains akin to those in the theatre hanging from the top whereas in Fig. 100 and Fig. 111, the *nayika* is shown seated on a European style chair. In this respect, typologically these portraits closely relate to those of babus and bibis seated on chairs and playing the *sitar* or those of heroines seated on Victorian chairs combing their hair, referred to earlier.

It is most likely that some of the earlier miniature paintings or carved relief panels depicting the *kakubha* type of *nayika* served as prototypes for the later Kalighat versions, but it is interesting that the artists working in the second half of the nineteenth century have recast her image by seating her on a Victorian chair or under curtains akin to those in the theatre.

The sixth portrait of the women's' series, Fig. 114, depicts a half-length figure of a woman in an extremely titillating stance, posing for a picture. The woman is clad in the same fancy white sari with dotted patterns all over and the typical red and blue double band border as in the rest of the paintings in the series. The painting needs to be looked at in comparison with two other companion pieces: Fig. 115 from the British Museum and IS 262 from the Victoria and Albert Museum (published Archer, 1975: Fig. 54). The way the women in the BM and the Herwitz collections have been depicted is

Fig. 115

so similar in terms of their compositional scheme, pose, and posture, their gaze, their long curly hair, the way their heavy locks cling to their cheeks, the gesture of covering (or uncovering?) the right breast, their act of pulling the sari over the head, and the general style of draping it, that both works appear to follow a pre-existing iconographic convention.

The companion piece from the V & A mentioned above has been inscribed 'Bengali woman public'.[40] W. G. Archer has published it as 'courtesan'.[41] The V & A painting, though stylistically completely different from the two described above, undoubtedly follows the same thematic and iconographic code. Unless the exposed breast is considered to be an indicator of this, there is nothing in these paintings to identify these women as courtesans or public women. The Herwitz painting, both stylistically and in terms of female

Fig. 114

Fig. 114 (see page 219)
Portrait of a Woman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 121

Half-length portraits became popular in India, primarily under the influence of European paintings but partially through Mughal portraiture of a kind that was itself prompted by European prototypes.

This painting, of which there is a virtually identical companion piece in the British Museum (Fig. 115), suggests that it represented an idealised but a particular woman, perhaps the heroine of a popular play, which was reproduced in many versions and sold in the same way as a photographic carte-de-visite or picture postcards of well-known personalities of the time.

Fig. 115
Portrait of a Woman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 41 x 28 cm
Collection: BM, 133 357, 1955
4-16, 018
'Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum'

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept, *see* caption to Fig. 114.

Fig. 116

Fig. 116
Nayika Chitra
Battala engraving, published in
Sachitra Ratishastra
Calcutta, 1908

The appearance of pictures of lewdly made-up women, as depicted here, in *ratishastras* or books on eroticism, clearly shows that these depictions, as much as of those in Kalighat painting, were new female images of the era of mechanical reproduction: images available to the masses for personal possession and consumption.

portrayal, is integrally connected with the other six in the series and, as has been seen earlier, if some of them clearly represented heroines or *nayika*s of literary works, there would be little reason to believe that this one in particular portrayed a courtesan. Once again it must be emphasised that the spaces of courtesans and actresses in nineteenth century Calcutta often overlapped and the two could not always be separated in pictorial representations. Nevertheless, the women's manner of striking a highly amorous and seductive pose to be 'captured' by the artist, working more in the style of standing behind the camera than rendering the usual Sitas and Parvatis, has much to do with the conscious creation of the female image as an object of desire; a phenomenon heightened as much by the growth of theatre, book printing, and publishing (Fig. 116), new techniques of reproduction and photography as the rise of the babu culture that patronised courtesans and actresses as mistresses.

The last of the Herwitz's seven women series, Fig. 117, being discussed here shows a stylish upper-class woman being attended to by a barber who is cleaning her ear. In terms of general typology, the painting belongs to the class of portraits of babus, bibis, and dandies, which will be discussed later in this chapter. This particular painting is being reviewed here because it is considered a part of the seven women series on account of the typical drape of the woman and also to decode her persona as new female type represented by the other six women in the series. Fig. 118, though stylistically different, represents the same theme in the same compositional scheme, while Fig. 82, also from the same Herwitz album, depicts a barber cleaning the ear of a babu, the male counterpart of a bibi. The babu in these paintings is equally foppishly made-up, complete with a fancy shawl thrown over his shoulders, the carefully pleated end of his *dhoti* demonstratively fanning out near his legs, pointed buckled shoes adorning his feet, and a hookah or a rose held in his right hand. The woman, seated on a Victorian style chair, is fully decked out with ornaments, her hair is neatly tied in a bun, and she holds a hookah in her right hand while the barber cleans her ear.

In the V & A collection there is a painting dealing with the same theme. W G Archer has published it as: 'Courtesan with barber'.[42] According to him, the painting is mis-inscribed in English: 'Native Dr. attending sick bibi or woman'. He describes it as follows:

Fig. 117

Fig. 117
Barber Cleaning a Woman's Ear
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 30

A fashionable woman, one breast exposed, seated on a Victorian chair, holding a hookah and enjoying the services of a barber cleaning her ear, is a stock image directly stemming from the fashionable world of nineteenth century Calcutta.
Also *see* caption to Fig. 118.

'The courtesan is seated on a chair, holding a hookah, while the barber pierces her ear before inserting an earring'. The painting is obviously a companion piece to Fig. 117.

Once again there is nothing in the painting to identify the woman as a courtesan. Archer's interpretation that the barber is piercing her ear may not be correct because the woman is already wearing earrings. The inscription in English would be correct to the extent that the woman represents a bibi but may not be correct in identifying the male as a 'native doctor'. Apparently, a barber was attached to every upper-class household to assist the ladies and gentlemen with their coiffures and make-up; to cut their nails and to clean their ears. The observations of a nineteenth century Christian

Fig. 118

missionary, the Rev. W. H. Hart, are quite enlightening in this context: 'Finally to complete the service of the household, the hairdresser must be called in. He was on visiting terms with all the fine ladies of Calcutta, and with many of the gentlemen too.'[43] These 'fine ladies' were the product of nineteenth century Calcutta whom the Kalighat artist had taken delight in portraying, improvising in series, and sometimes satirising. I shall discuss them in greater detail in the context of babus and dandies, the scions of the nouveau-riche Calcutta families and their lifestyle.

As the Kalighat artist delineated the new female types, such as actresses, heroines, *nayikas*, fashionable ladies, and courtesans, he took his cue largely from the pre-existing models of goddesses and divine consorts. There was hardly any differentiation between the pictorialisation of images of goddesses and consorts and that of courtesans, actresses, and the fashionable ladies of Calcutta in terms of their postures, gestures, figuration, composition, or in the manner in which the sari was draped, exposing or covering limbs, or general ornamentation. When the Sitas, Parvatis, Annapurnas, Sarasvatis, Lakshmis, and Ganesha–Jananis shed their crowns, their haloes, their iconographic emblems, their vehicles, their thrones and lotus-pedestals, and their mythological locale in favour of Victorian chairs, fancy styles of clothing and coiffure, and took on new emblems such as smoking pipes and more seductive stances and gazes, they emerged in their new roles as courtesans, dandies, actresses, and heroines.

With the Bengali theatre introducing women to enact female roles, plays had begun to win extraordinary popularity. Actresses and heroines became instant celebrities. Before women began playing female roles, those were performed by men. Bhuban Mohun Mittra[44] referring to Babu Nabinchandar Bose's theatre at Sham Bazaar, records in 1835 that '... the fair sex of Bengal are always seen on the stage, as the female parts are almost exclusively performed by Hindu women'. Nabin Chandra Basu was among the first to introduce women on the stage. As early as 1835 he staged *Vidya Sundar* in which the characters of Vidya, Malini, and other female roles were played by women. Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844–1911), the founder of the first public theatre in Bengal, put actresses permanently on the stage.[45] In 1873, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Shormishta* had actresses. Innumerable other plays followed suit. By the end of the nineteenth century, leaflets, posters, Battala books, and mushrooming theatre magazines began to promulgate the new idealised image of the seductive woman in the mould of an actress; a source of 'rapture and delight'.[46] Kalighat painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not remain immune to this new wave running through the city and its bazaars. The images of seven women from the Herwitz collection discussed above and the related companion pieces and versions found in various other collections were unquestionably born of this composite situation of proliferation of new female types (actresses, courtesans, fashionable ladies) not only as they were, but also as they had been idealised in the minds of the masses as objects of desire. The depiction of theatre curtains, 'memorable' poses, whose

Fig. 118
Barber Cleaning a Woman's Ear
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 37

Here the stock image of a nineteenth century Calcutta barber has been portrayed with a sense of humour. His chinless face, cleaning pins characteristically tucked in his turban, and the cunning look in his eyes are very well matched with the flirtatious gesture and enchanting smile of his lady customer. As the babus spent most of their time with their mistresses and courtesans, their neglected wives and concubines sought solace in the company of servants.

Also *see* caption to *Fig.* 117.

life was no more than a fraction of a second in the narrative itself, was now iconised on paper for permanent possession and consumption, and some of the postures, gestures, make-up, and allusion to the iconography of certain known heroines and *nayika*s in these paintings tell us a great deal about the possible impact of theatre on them.

Theatre and the Cultic Imagery

As we have seen in Chapter 2, some of the cultural practices of contemporary Calcutta from which the Kalighat artist drew resources included the *jatra* folk theatre and *swang* pantomimes. These semi-dramatic, musical performances, with occasional dialogue thrown in were, in the later period, held in open spaces. Originally the subject matter of these consisted of mythological stories pertaining to Hindu gods and goddesses. Secular subjects, such as the love story of Vidya–Sundar also came to be included in later *jatra*s, as satirising the babus and dandies, became popular in the latter day *swang* shows. As we sift through a range of Kalighat paintings, our attention is drawn to several of them embellished with rippled curtains hanging from the top. Usually there are three ripples flanked by loose, hanging, gathered ends on either side, occasionally marked by several parallel lines indicative of drapery folds, but mostly plain. The fact that hardly any writer on Kalighat painting has sought to interpret the depiction of curtains in these paintings is surprising. These curtains were in all probability the Kalighat painters' endeavour at representing Western-style theatre curtains conventionally used on the proscenium stage. As we shall see in the course of this chapter, imagery from theatre considerably influenced the pictorial conception of Kalighat painting. The shining, rippled curtains on the proscenium stage with their highlighted drapery folds cast such magic on Kalighat painters that they almost sensuously indulged in depicting them and often dressed up characters in their paintings in velvet theatre curtains. The curtains and the tableauesque characters seated beneath them also bring to mind old photographs taken in photo studios in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century where such gathered curtains were used as backdrops to create a certain aristocratic ambience and to balance the composition of the painting.

As we examine a number of paintings, we increasingly notice that the depiction of curtains in them was not merely a matter of chance or symbolic but served as a crucial element in the artists' overall scheme. The postures, gestures, figuration, composition, and the gaze of the characters portrayed beneath the curtains too hinted at inspiration from theatre. In certain series of Kalighat paintings, especially those deemed to be the works of *sutradhara*s or *bhaskara*s, we see the high contrast chiaroscuro that could have resulted from the experience of having watched theatre curtains under bright lights. This also gave the characters in the painting an appearance of being fictive rather than real. In some cases, the characters depicted in them were actually derived from certain known theatrical performances of the time. Having said this, let me hasten to clarify that although a majority of paintings with such curtains were marked by strong theatrical elements, there were others with an equally strong sense of theatricality about them but were devoid of curtains. On the other

Fig. 119

Fig. 119
Coronation of Rama
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, G 16

hand, I have rarely encountered paintings wholly devoid of theatrical postures, gestures, or posing for a picture appearnces and yet depicting curtains on top. That is to say, the images of the era of photography and European-style theatre, either directly, or occasionally, filtered through engravings, lithographs, and, somewhat later, oleographs (the period of all these coincides with that of the Kalighat paintings at various stages), and had a definite impact on Kalighat painting, and therefore the inclusion of curtains in some of them was only a casual, literal remnant of this more vital phenomenon, providing a critical clue but not the only one.

The theme of the coronation of Rama, as depicted in Kalighat painting, (Fig. 119), is almost invariably marked by raised curtains on top. Its performative context clearly emerges, not from these alone but also from the frozen tableauesque composition in which Rama and Sita are shown seated on a throne, almost frontally (a slight three-fourth tilt is a part of the general stylisation of the artists of the Kalighat genre), facing the audience–devotees, in the climactic scene of the *Ramayana*, attended by a male parasol bearer standing on the left. The depiction is highly standardised in all its variations [five paintings in the Herwitz collection, at least one in the V & A (published Archer: 1971, Fig. 15) and one in the IOL (Add. Or. 1894)], and therefore appears to follow a pre-existing model, most likely of theatrical inspiration. As early as the fifteenth century, a Bengali *Ramayana* was composed by the folk poet Krittibas Ojha. Rama stories were popular among the *panchali* singers and *kathakata* narrators. *Jatra* and Western-style theatrical performances based on the *Ramayana* were known. Krishnakamala Goswami, in a preface to his new *Jatra Vichitravilasa*, published in 1874, refers to 'composing and acting dramas whose subjects are taken either from *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*'.[47] A Battala engraving of the same theme, from about the same period, too shows Rama and Sita seated on a throne beneath theatre-like curtains in which Rama holds an arrow in his raised right hand, and Sita with her right hand pulls a portion of her sari over her head, forming an arch or a canopy in a pictorial construction that is very similar to that in the Kalighat paintings (published Sukumar Sen, 1989, Fig. 18).

In northern India, Ramlila theatre was very popular. When the climactic scene of the coronation of Rama was enacted, it assumed the form of a cultic tableau which the audience, now as devotees, worshipped. Innumerable cultic paintings depicting this sacred tableau were executed and sold. These must have definitely come into Calcutta with the banians who came from north India and Rajasthan. In many theatrical performances of the time it was common to find kings and courtiers wearing Mughal costumes, as is the case with the Kalighat paintings based on this theme. These factors together with the posing for a picture appearance indicate the theatrical inspiration of the pictorial concept of the coronation of the Rama paintings of Kalighat.

Another religious theme, equally tableauesque and standardised, with the same theatrical/photographic composition and almost invariably depicted under raised curtains, is that of Shiva–Parvati and Nandi (Fig. 76). In all its variations [at least four in the Herwitz collection], Shiva is depicted seated cross-legged on a throne with Parvati on his left thigh, both ready and steady, their gaze fixed on the devotees–audience–camera–onlooker. In terms of posture and gesture, Parvati here is hardly differentiated from Sita in the coronation series except that Parvati places her right foot on Nandi, Shiva's bull, using it as footstool and Sita places her foot on Hanuman who is shown kneeling before Rama. Once again the idea of the cultic paintings of this period deriving their form from theatrical tableaux becomes evident.

The powerful visual impact of characters, religious and secular, dressed up to play gods and goddesses or secular roles on the Kalighat artists as on other makers of visual imagery cannot be underemphasised. The extraordinary similarities between the visual compositions of *jatra* and certain cultic paintings from the Kalighat genre, coupled with the outward looking frozen gazes of attitudinised characters portrayed in the latter, appear to be products of such influences. If the artists were accustomed to making use of such pre-existing visual models to be found in the folk theatre, in their painterly practice there would be nothing to prevent them from drawing upon the modern theatre of the time in the same way.

From Performance to Painting

In the context of our discussion of the theatricality visible in figuration, composition, certain postures, gestures, and occasional indication of locale, it would be pertinent to discuss Kalighat paintings relating to the scandalous Tarakeshwar affair of 1873 of which several series were painted in the very year that it took place and subsequently. Here it would be important to mention that a number of literary works, including plays, were written on the theme, and of these at least one was staged and had a successful, prolonged run. The salient points of the episode are as follows. Madhab Chandra Giri, the Mahant or the head priest of the Shivaite shrine at Tarakeshwar, a place of pilgrimage renowned for its ability to induce barren women to give birth, had got involved in an erotic relationship with Elokeshi, the young and attractive wife of Nabinchandra Banerji who worked at a printing press in Calcutta while Elokeshi stayed with her parents in Tarakeshwar. Apparently Elokeshi's stepmother and father had played a conspiratorial role in encouraging the relationship for financial gain. On one of his periodic visits to Tarakeshwar, Nabin heard from the villagers about his wife's entanglement with the Mahant. Enraged, Nabin accosted Elokeshi who apparently confessed. They reconciled and decided to leave Tarakeshwar. Exasperated by offensive remarks made by his father-in-law and subsequent hurdles placed in his way by henchmen of the Mahant, Nabin killed Elokeshi by severing her throat with a fish knife on 27 May 1873. In the trial that ensued, Nabin was awarded life imprisonment and the Mahant was fined and sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment.

The episode, redolent with all the elements of a juicy scandal —sex, jealousy, murder, involvement of a temple priest—began to be layered with popular judgements on morality, with sentiments running high in favour of Nabin or Elokeshi or the Mahant. With fact and fiction consciously mixed up, depending upon the moral position adopted by each narrator, the episode assumed mythological proportions. Innumerable literary works, newspaper reports, engravings, and Kalighat-type paintings inspired by the event came into being during the very year when the incident occurred and continued to be popular up to first quarter of the twentieth century. One of the most exhaustive documents on the subject is in the form of criminal rulings (the judgements of appellate judges) passed by W. Markby and E. G. Birch published in the *Weekly Reporter* dated 1892. In this report, all the persons directly or indirectly connected with the

episode are mentioned and the circumstance of the affair between the Mahant and Elokeshi are described in detail. Of about 20 plays written on the theme, at least one, *Mohanter ei ki Kaj* by Lakshminarayan Das, was successfully staged and had a prolonged run at the Bengal Theatre in Calcutta. 'The fortunes of the Bengal Theatre were made from the proceeds of this one play ... the phenomenal theatre run was remembered in the next century ... and the play was picked by a host of other companies and taken out of Calcutta.'[48]

Until now the literary material, the rulings of the appellate judges, and contemporary newspaper reports have been used by art historians to identify the thematic content of the Kalighat paintings relating to the episode. With the aid of this material, the paintings have been sequenced in terms of the chronology of the events as they occurred. The principal focus of art historians has been to describe the paintings in terms of identification of the characters represented and the role played by them in the entire affair. Very little has been said about the artists' codes of representation, reinvention of the requisite visual language, the need to sift through their own pictorial conventions, invention of narrative devices, and configuration of representational space and the nature of their responses: were these driven by social concerns or artistic ambition?

I will endeavour here to look at the paintings of the Tarakeshwar episode from these viewpoints. I am inspired to do this for two reasons: one, that outside these, Kalighat as a pictorial genre has rarely produced a series of narrative paintings that are sequentially connected, following a chronological scheme in the order in which the events occurred, and two, that in their conception, a distinct theatricality alluding to certain performative contexts becomes apparent.

We have seen in Chapter 2 that the forefathers of most artists of the Kalighat idiom, before they migrated to Calcutta, were engaged in painting narrative scrolls for picture shows. These long vertical scrolls were divided into several registers by means of horizontal borders. Selected episodes of a story were sequentially painted from top to bottom. All the episodes were not only interconnected by the running thread of the story but were knit together by a certain pictorial vocabulary. The identity of the characters was established by means of certain recognisable marks that persisted throughout the scroll so as to facilitate communication with the viewer. An individual register by itself made little sense, for the scrolls were not meant for sale but for use as part of an audio-visual performance by the itinerant *patuas*. In contrast, the single panel Kalighat *pats* were not meant for story-telling. Each painting depicted a cultic image, a religious tableau, or a portrait of a courtesan, a babu, a bibi, a dandy, a historical personality, or a domestic scene. Each painting was a complete entity in itself. Painting a running narrative through a number of related episodes, or painting single unrelated panels involve two different pictorial strategies. The Kalighat artists who had become adept in painting single panels from the early decades of the nineteenth century, when they first flocked to Calcutta to serve the

Fig. 120

Fig. 120
The Mahant Offers the 'Child-birth Medicine' to Elokeshi
Kalighat painting, c. 1875–80.
Collection: V & A, I.S.111-1965
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

The episode of the Mahant offering the 'child-birth medicine' to Elokeshi with a view to drugging or intoxicating her before committing rape, occurs in several plays written/staged on the theme, and therefore its depiction in the paintings opens up the possibility of some influence from theatrical imagery on the paintings relating to the Tarakeshwar affair.

potential new market for souvenirs, now for the first time, almost half a century later, turned to narrative series as they dealt with the Tarakeshwar episode. Interestingly, though most of them had come from a tradition of painting narrative scrolls and must have been familiar with the scroll paintings being shown around by their brethren, the picture showmen, when faced with the situation of narrativising the Tarakeshwar affair, they did not resort to the scroll painters' style, pictorial scheme, or narrative devices but approached the subject matter in their own unique idiom. This might have been so because during these 50 years they had got used to painting single panels in a particular format and idiom, and had lost the experience of painting running scrolls as their forefathers in the villages had

done. Moreover, it is most likely that the buyers in Calcutta did not always purchase an entire series but bought isolated pieces of their choice depicting particular events of the episode.

Talking of the 'effect of picture on picture' in the development of a stylistic genre, one ought to understand 'picture' in the broader sense of any visual expression that could possibly have an impact on another form. The process of conceptualisation of images has always been somewhat complex and multi-layered. A descriptive literary narrative, a song, a proverb, a painting, or a theatrical scene can beget a new visual image or composition. Vehicles of conveyance and transfiguration of pictorial representation in Kalighat painting have been many, and in that the role of theatrical imagery has been quite crucial. Against this background, I shall examine a few Kalighat paintings relating to the Tarakeshwar affair, around which several plays were written and staged,[49] and quite clearly influenced the conceptualisation of the paintings.

Let us start with Fig. 120 (also compare Knizkova: 1975, Pl. 2,3). Here the Mahant of Tarakeshwar is depicted holding a glass which he is offering to Elokeshi. She, seated on a couch, in reluctance or bashfulness has turned her face away from the Mahant who is apparently cajoling her to accept the glass by holding her hand. The paintings of this type are variously captioned by scholars: 'The Mahant plies the reluctant Elokeshi with Liquor'[50] or 'Mahant Madhav Chandra Giri offering liquor to Elokeshi'.[51] None of the press reports or surviving legal documents refer to the Mahant plying Elokeshi with alcohol. The records of the Hooghly Sessions Court, where the trials took place were destroyed after the prescribed period of 25 years.[52] Criminal Rulings that set out the appellate judgements of two British judges of the Calcutta High Court, given against the appeal of the Mahant, summarise the statements of three witnesses who had deposed before the sessions courts. According to Gopinatha Roy, one of the witnesses, Elokeshi was frequently spotted at the Mahant's private residence at night and coming away from there the following morning; that these visits were at intervals of three or four days, and lasted for about a year; that she was seen with the Mahant in his bedroom, at the bathing *ghat*, or coming to the Mahant's house accompanied by her younger sister Muktakeshi and a servant named Telibo.[53] The second witness, Rameshwar Pattro, talks of having seen Elokeshi and the Mahant sitting on the bed in the Mahant's home: 'the Mahant gave her a slap on the back, whereupon she ran into another room.'[54] According to a third witness, Elokeshi and Telibo were seen entering the Mahant's house, causing nearby male and female workers to comment: 'There goes the mistress.' Reflections of some of the situations can be seen in Fig. 121 and 122.

Though the statements of the witnesses provide important information about the affair and therefore throw valuable light on the paintings, they do not refer to the Mahant offering Elokeshi alcohol. On the other hand *Mahanter ei Kaj*, a play by Jogendra Nath Ghosh, written in 1873 and probably staged a little later, has a graphic description of an event that appears to have been illustrated in the

Fig. 121
The Mahant Fans Elokeshi
Kalighat painting, c. 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.110-1965
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

It is doubtful whether the depiction here is that of the Mahant fanning Elokeshi as part of their erotic dalliance or his attempting to comfort her when she regains consciousness after fainting after having taken the Mahant's 'childbirth medicine', as described in some of the plays. That Elokeshi holding a flower in her hand would strengthen the first possibility.

Fig. 121

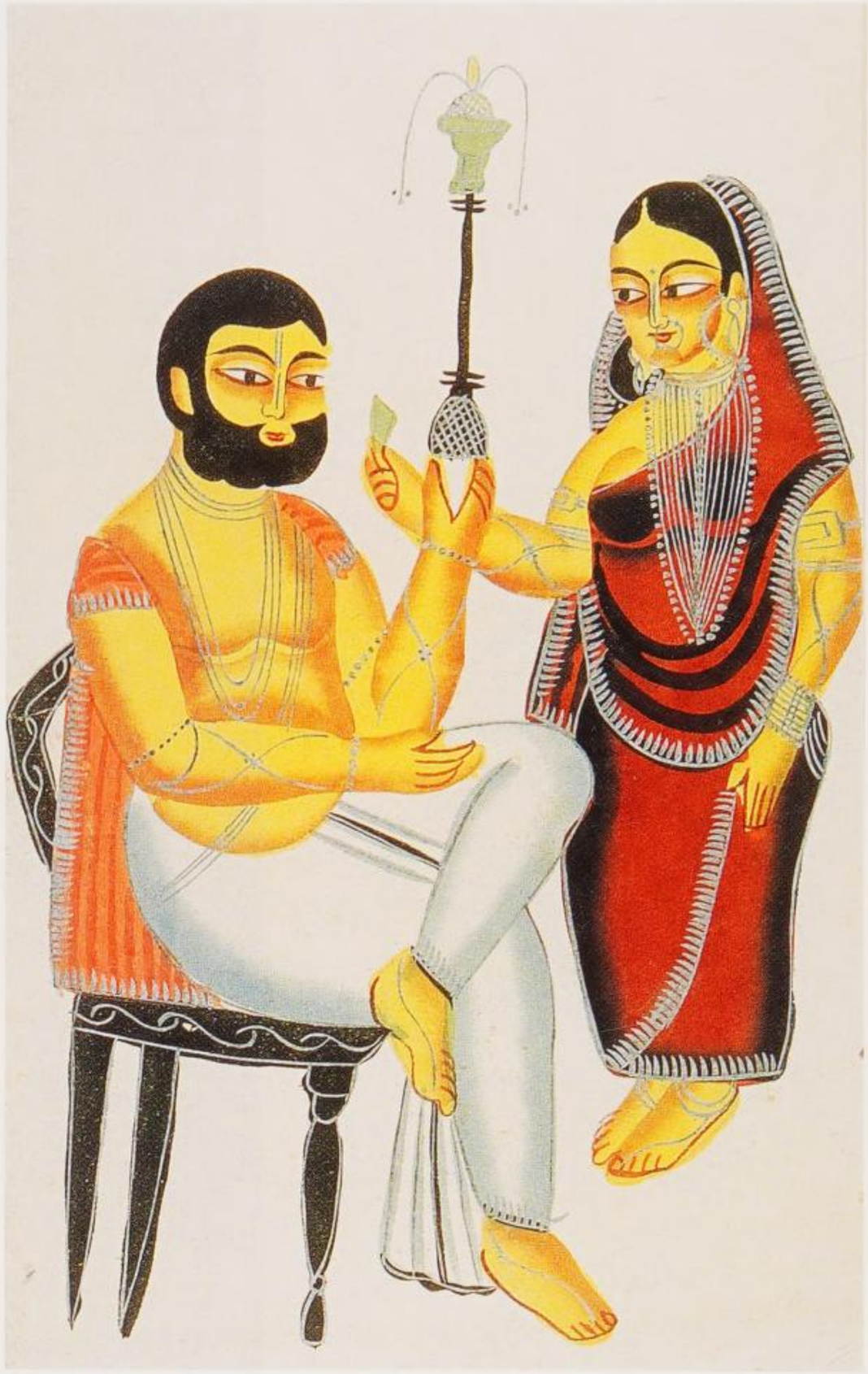

Fig. 122

paintings.[55] The play has a scene in which Elokeshi narrates to Nabin details of her encounter with the Mahant. According to this,[56] on Saturday evening Elokeshi's mother received information that her daughter would be required to go to Mahant's house to take medicine for childbirth. The mother first took Elokeshi to Tarakeshwar shrine to make an obeisance before going on to the Mahant's home. Here Elokeshi noticed that others who had come for the same medicine, took it from outside and went away whereas she was required to sit in a room. After disposing of others, the Mahant entered the room and, laughing and joking with Elokeshi's mother and another woman (probably Telibo), inquired whether the medicine was to be administered to her daughter. The Mahant then pontificated on the ritual importance of having a child and went to the extent of saying that according to the sacred books 'if the husband was not near, another person could also ...'. Then the Mahant returned with a glass of medicine that was pungent and sweet, tasting of milk and sugar mixed with chilli, and said that Elokeshi would need to come and take the medicine periodically. He then sent some *prasada* (a portion of the offerings at the temple), after eating which Elokeshi began to feel uncomfortable and her head began to spin. Her mother asked her to recline on the bed and relax. Elokeshi fell asleep and was not aware of what transpired thereafter.

Fig. 122
Elokeshi Offers a Betel-Leaf to the Mahant
Kalighat painting, 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.M.137-1914
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

The figure of the Mahant resembles that of a Calcutta dandy sitting on a Victorian chair holding a hookah (*see* Fig. 129 and 130), whereas that of Elokeshi is cast from the mould of a courtesan as depicted in Fig. 38 and 176.

According to the documents of the Mahant's trial, the relationship between the Mahant and Elokeshi lasted over a year and therefore erotic dalliance of the kind depicted here was imagined by the artist.

Fig. 123.
Elokeshi Falls at Nabin's Feet
Kalighat painting, c. 1875.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: Sushmita Tandon
Allahabad

Elokeshi falling at Nabin's feet, confessing her relationship with the Mahant and begging forgiveness, is a detail taken by the Kalighat *patua* direct from some of the plays based on the theme of the Tarakeshwar affair.

Fig. 123

The absence of any reference to Elokeshi going to the Mahant to receive medicine for childbirth in the otherwise detailed testimony recorded in the Rulings of the appellate judges, and, on the other hand, elaborate descriptions of the episode in the plays, all written, some staged in 1873–4, indicate the importance of the visual impact that the plays must have had on the minds of the Kalighat artists.

Another episode from the Tarakeshwar affair that was frequently depicted by the Kalighat artist, and one that was referred to in the plays of the time, pertains to Elokeshi falling at her husband Nabin's feet and confessing her conduct. Fig. 123[57] shows Elokeshi

crouching at Nabin's feet and asking for forgiveness, while he stands firm, raising his right hand in a gesture of exoneration. *Mohanter ei ki Kaj*, a play written by Lakshminarayan Das in 1873, the year the murder took place, and also staged that year to full houses at the National Theatre, Calcutta, describes a scene in which Kamala (Elokeshi's changed name in the play) is portrayed clutching Nabin's feet (Nabiner *charan dhariya*), and saying: 'I am guilty of immoral actions, I am not fit to touch your feet' (*ami kukarma karechi, tomar charane dharbara juggi noi*). This theatrical scene is most likely to have had a powerful visual and sentimental impact on the painters. It may be recalled that a lithograph showing Elokeshi falling at Nabin's feet illustrated the book: *Mohanter ei Kaj*[58] and *Ajkar Bajar Bhau*[59], a variant of it, both published in 1873. Though stylistically the engravings and the Kalighat painting are unrelated, there is a striking similarity between the figuration and composition, which may have been derived from the theatrical scene described above.

The play *Mohanter ei ki Kaj* by Lakshminarayan Das also appears to have inspired the paintings depicting the assault on Elokeshi and her murder. Both the play and the paintings, appear to clearly differentiate between the assault and the final severing of her neck; a coincidence that underlines the interconnection between the two mediums. Part IV, scene 2 [60] of the play details, through dialogues and stage instructions, the episode of Elokeshi's murder. Some of the salient points of the scene are summarised here to convey the graphic impact that theatre had on the paintings: Kamala (Elokeshi) enters the stage with a trunk, ready to leave Tarakeshwar for Calcutta with Nabin. Talks to the maid Tara about this. Both leave the stage. Nabin enters, depressed and frustrated. Talks about his inability to get a palanquin and palanquin-bearers; shouts angrily that all the palanquin bearers had refused under pressure from the Mahant. He complains that even he, a man, has fallen a hapless victim to the Mahant's wicked games and can understand Kamala's (Elokeshi's) helplessness. Kamala enters and sees Nabin depressed and disturbed; laments at her misfortune that she will never be able to serve her husband, etc. Nabin too wails about the misfortune that he is a poor brahmin and cannot 'enjoy' (*bhog*) his beautiful wife on account of someone else's misconduct and because of this has to abandon her, who is so dear to him. He asks Kamala for a *paan*, and she busies herself to prepare one. Angry, Nabin begins to laugh hysterically and hurriedly goes and gets hold of a sharp fish knife (*druta giya aish-boti grahan*) and talks of 'bringing everything to an end'. Saying 'let me see how he takes away Kamala', he stabs her with the knife for the first time (*pratham aghat Kamalake*). 'Placing one hand on the wound and stretching out the other' (*ek hasta khata sthane, anna prashariya*), Kamala says:

> Lord, what i had thought has come to happen; my complete destruction has approached. If I die, I am not sorry; that would be the right punishment for me, but because of this sinner, even your life will be lost. I will be the cause of my lord's death [second and third stab],[Kamala falls down and dies].

This theatrical scene is reflected in Fig. 124 and 125. The former has been captioned 'The fatal blow'[61] or 'Nabin preparing to deliver

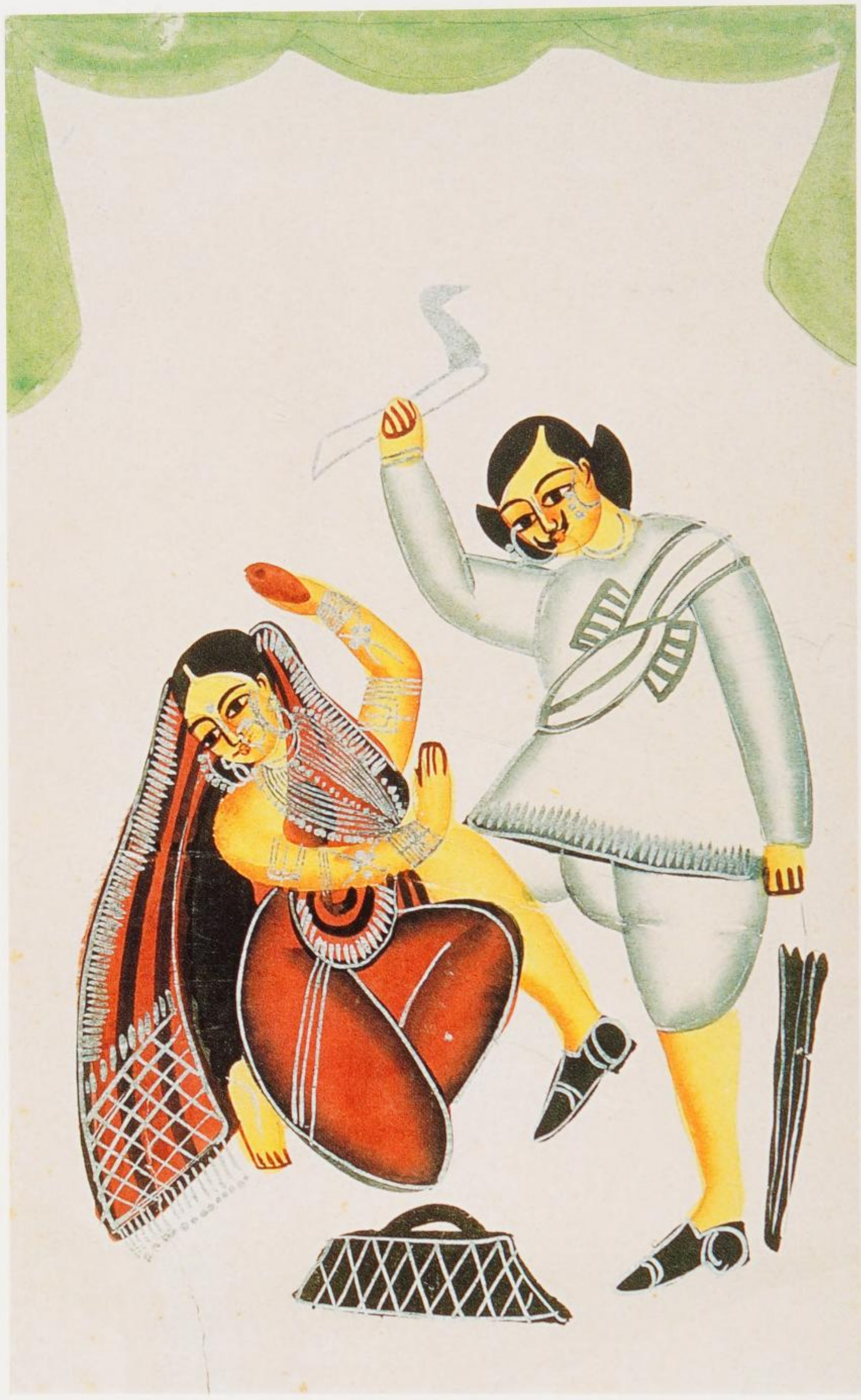

Fig. 124
After the First Blow
Kalighat painting, c. 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 am
Collection: V & A, I.M.140-1914
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Plays published/staged on the theme refer to Elokeshi's words of remorse and caution to Nabin after the first blow. It is likely that the painting depicts this detail from one of the plays.

Fig. 124

the fateful blow to kill Elokeshi',[62] whereas the latter is described: 'After the murder'[63] or 'Nabin standing over Elokeshi's corpse'.[64] The above mentioned play differentiates between the 'first blow' and the 'fatal blows'. The paintings appear to illustrate these two different situations and to that extent follow the theatrical version. In the play Elokeshi vouchsafes a long monologue after the 'first blow' and clearly refers to subsequent 'second and third blows' after which 'Kamala [Elokeshi] falls down and dies'. Fig. 124 is in all probability representing the situation after the first stab when Elokeshi is supposed to have uttered her famous last words. The play graphically describes her posture after the first stab: 'placing one hand over the

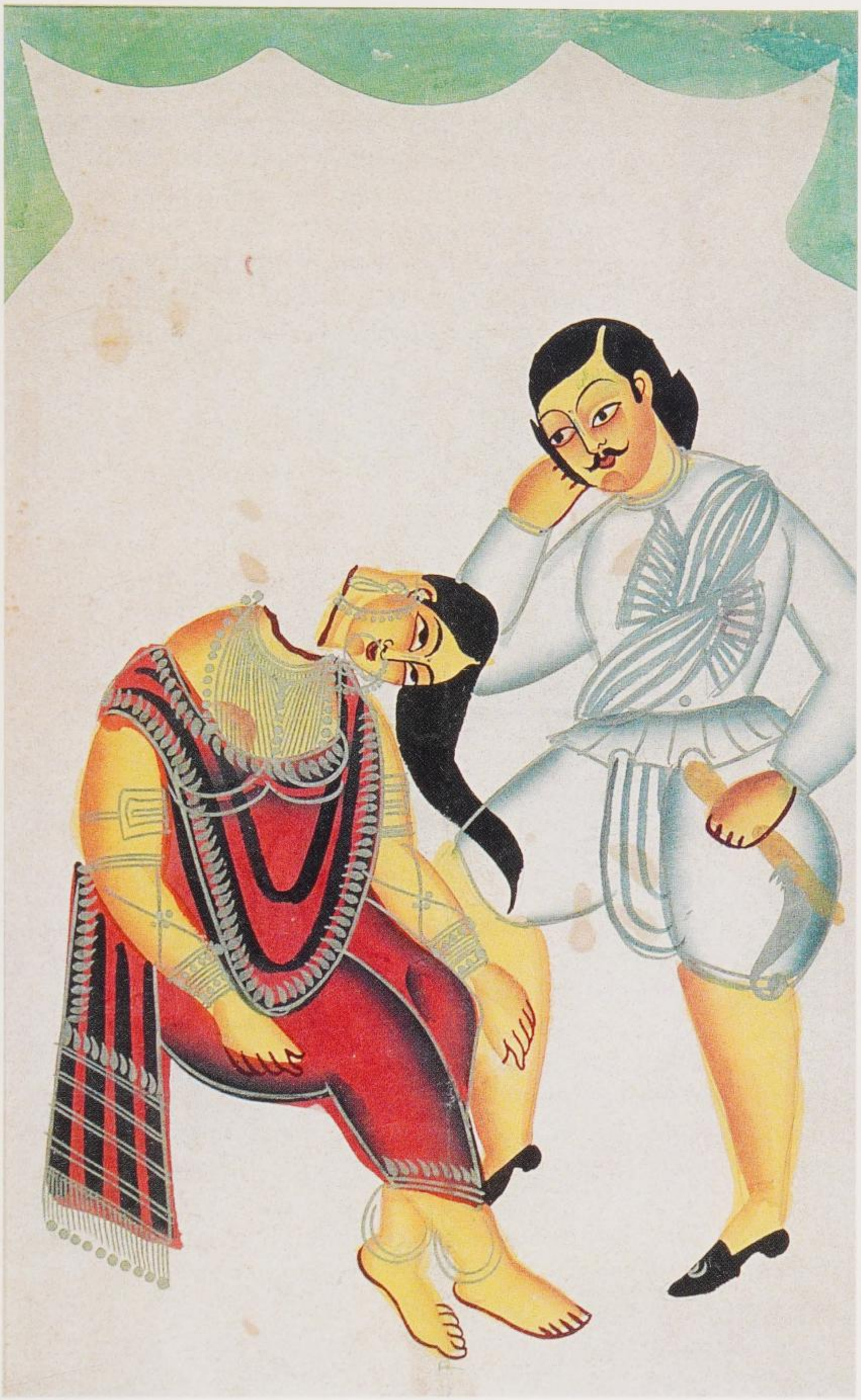

Fig. 125

Fig. 125
Nabin Kills Elokeshi
Kalighat painting, 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.240-1961
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Besides Nabin's babu appearance and posture, the rippled curtains on top evoke a reference to a performative context.

wound and stretching out the other'. The painting, though not exactly illustrating this, comes quite close to it. There is a certain ambivalence here: Is she beseeching him, with the gesture of her raised right hand, not to kill her and has turned her face away from him in fear or repugnance *or* is she telling him to pause and listen to her (monologue) and therefore has turned her face towards the audience (the mannerism adopted when a speech was delivered)! Since most paintings relating to the Tarakeshwar affair appear to follow the plays, there would be little reason not to consider Fig. 124 as an illustration of one of the most heartrending theatrical situations detailed in the plays: Elokeshi's last words before her murder, not to

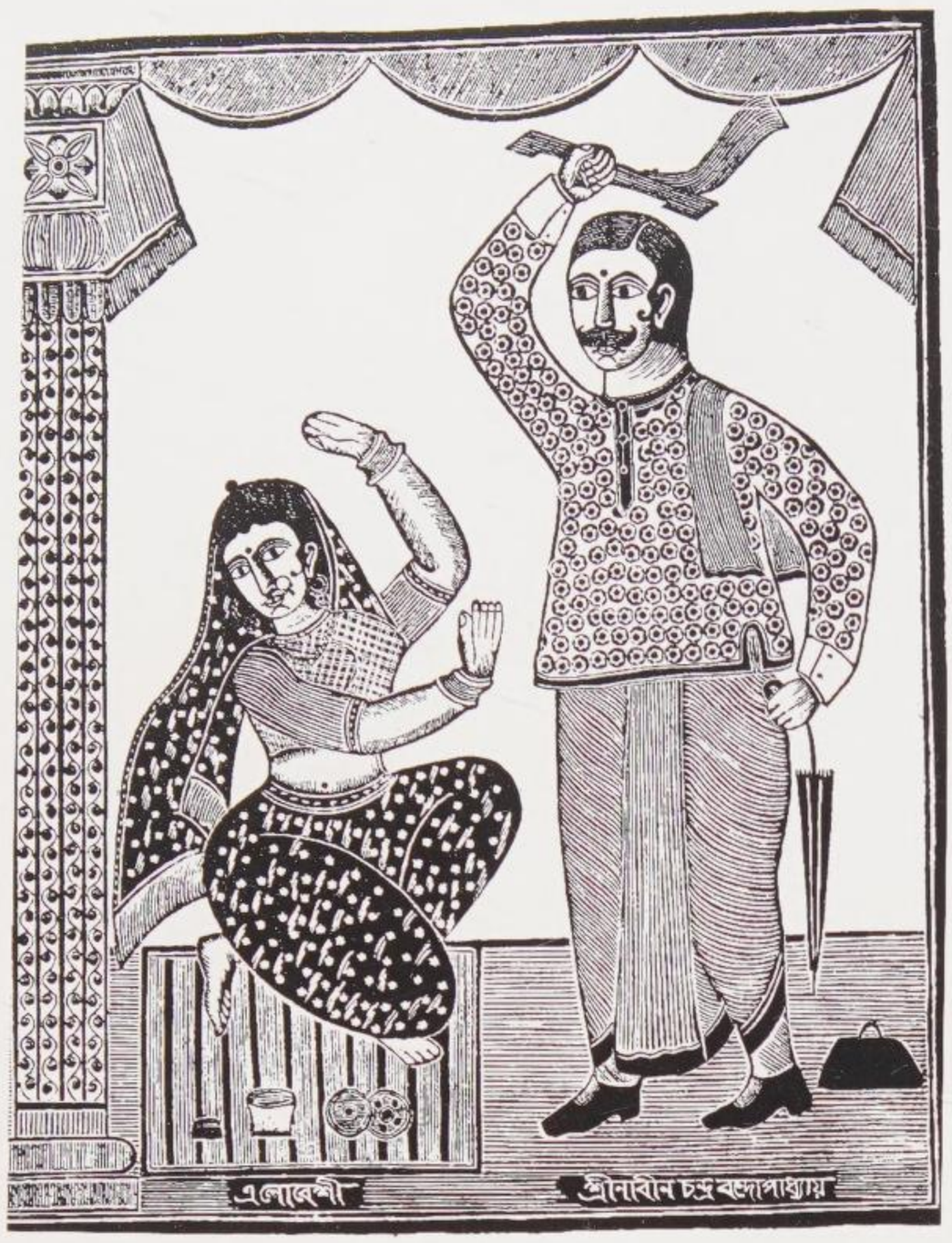

Fig. 126

Fig. 126
Nabin Strikes Elokeshi with a Fish-Knife
Engraving, Calcutta, 19th century.
Black-and-white print
Private Collection

Notable are the containers of *paan* and its ingredients lying on the floor, a direct borrowing from the play: *Mohanter ei ki Kaj*, in which Elokeshi is asked by Nabin to make him a *paan*.

mention the equally theatrical posture of Nabin, addressed to the audience, and the rippled curtains above. The almost standardised composition, characterisation, and the general postures of the figures in most variations of the theme in the paintings presumes a powerful visual impact on the artists, and in this particular case a theatrical source is more than likely. It is only in the play mentioned above that, just before the murder, Nabin asked Elokeshi to make him a *paan*. The text of the play has bracketed information: 'she busies herself to make a *paan*'. Surprisingly this little detail, though not recorded in the Kalighat paintings, has found a place in one of the black-and-white engravings intrinsically connected with the Kalighat genre. In Fig. 126 Nabin and Elokeshi are typecast, as in their Kalighat counterparts, under rippled curtains, but near Elokeshi's feet, on a striped *durrie* or grass mat one sees containers used for storing *paan* and other accessories, particularly typical among these being the flat, round container on the right with hollow circular compartments for catechu, cardamom, cloves, areca nut, etc., the ingredients consumed with *paan*.

The play, *Mohanter ei ki Kaj*, that had a prolonged popular run in Calcutta, which projected Elokeshi making a *paan* for Nabin just before her murder, must certainly have been the source of inspiration for the woodcut. This feature directly connects the play with the woodcut, and because the paintings on this theme and the woodcut appear to be virtually facsimiles of each other, it would be reasonable to surmise that the scene in both types represented Elokeshi delivering her final epilogue after the first stab.

The Mahant's trial was over by December 1873 with the dismissal of his appeal by the High Court, and he was sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of three thousand rupees. Several literary works, including plays, centering on the Mahant's trial and punishment were composed after this.

The trial of Nabin and the Mahant itself had all the elements of a popular drama and, according to some of the newspapers of the time, the courts were flooded with uncontrollable crowds of excited spectators: 'the new law courts and trial procedure which at [the]time were something of a public spectacle and that followed the tropes of a suspense drama ...'.[65] Fig. 127, depicting the English judge conducting the 'Mahant's Trial', has all the elements of a theatrical scene, with the Mahant shown standing in a witness box. This took place much after Nabin was convicted.

Given this lapse of time, it is unlikely that Elokeshi's decapitated head and body remained as well preserved as that

Fig. 127

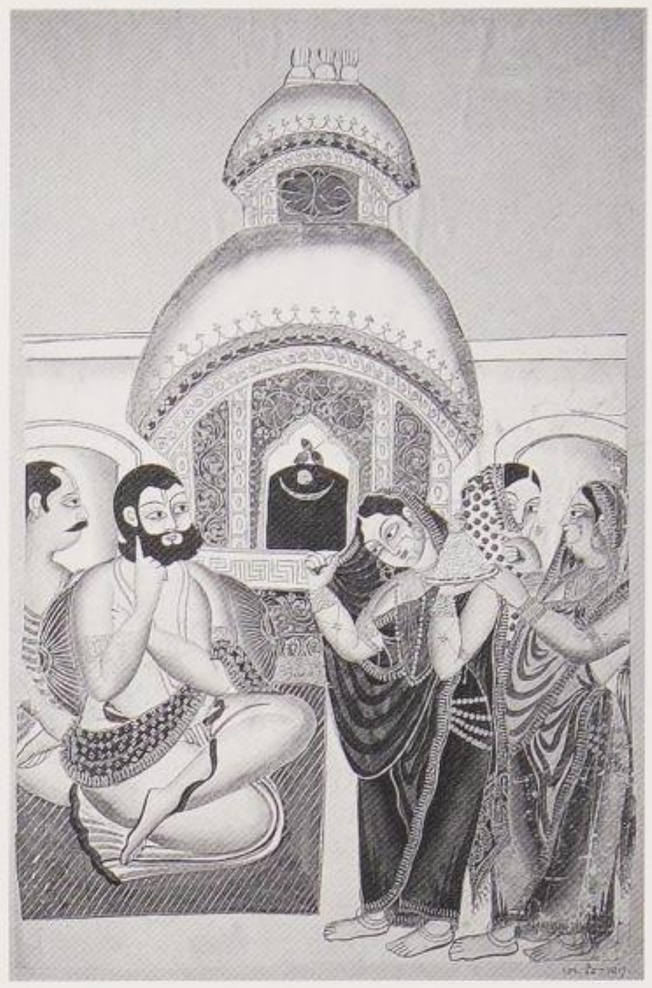

Fig. 128

Fig. 127
Trial of the Mahant of Tarakeshwar
Kalighat painting, c. 1875.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.38-197
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Though on the ground of the presence of certain stylistic features such as subtle colours and the use of the top hat, the painting was dated earlier to 1845 (Archer, 1953) but its subsequent identification with the Tarakeshwar affair places it in c. 1875, thereby cautioning the art-historian that an evolutionary approach to dating can be full of pitfalls.

Fig. 128 (*see* page 220)
Elokeshi at the Tarakeshwar Shrine
Kalighat painting, c. 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.M.2/86-1917
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

produced before the judge in the painting, further underlining the theatrical conceptualisation of the scene. The Mahant operating an oil-press in jail as part of the punishment, proverbially meted out to prisoners undergoing rigorous imprisonment, has been the theme of several plays as well as Kalighat paintings.

Besides the fact that several episodes of the Tarakeshwar affair depicted in the paintings have direct thematic parallels in the plays, what is most striking is the artists' construction of a certain performative framework in which two characters do not form a frozen tableau but are in a dialogic stance. In Fig. 128, the Mahant, with a raised finger, is actually *addressing* Elokeshi; in Fig. 120 the Mahant is in the process of *persuading* Elokeshi to accept the glass offered by him, and her posture is actually in *response* to the Mahant's act; in Fig. 124 there is clearly co-related action and *reaction*: Nabin raising the knife to stab and Elokeshi *responding* to his action with an equally *animated* posture, and in Fig. 127 the clerk on the right and the guard who has custody of Nabin and the Mahant are all *engaged* in mimetic personation.

The animated, expressive, directed, and participatory postures and gestures clearly differentiate the paintings relating to the Tarakeshwar affair from other iconic or emblematic paintings depicting Krishna–Balarama, Radha–Krishna, Shiva–Parvati, Rama–Sita, etc., in which the characters in each pair are marked by their passive coexistence rather than interaction as is the case in the Tarakeshwar ones. This element of interaction between characters, unique to these paintings, owes much to the fact that the whole affair was repeatedly improvised and articulated in the plays and the theatre of the times.

Though the individual characters of the Tarakeshwar affair in the paintings may have been partially modelled after certain pre-existing figural types, the Mahant after Shiva, Nabin after the Bengali babu,[66] and Elokeshi after the divine consort images of Sita or Parvati, their interactive mode and action-bound relationship allude to performative conditions unforeseen in the Kalighat genre outside the paintings of the Tarakeshwar affair.

Babus and Dandies

The image of the babu, in Kalighat painting, was the male version of that of the bibi, the actress, the heroine, or the courtesan. If the courtesan was the commodity, he was the consumer. In the eyes of the Kalighat painter, the babu was a living cartoon (Fig. 129, 130, and 131). The marketability of babu pictures, like those of heroines and courtesans, was perhaps no different from that of pin-ups of renowned models or actors and actresses of the present-day: to be possessed, adored, and imitated. Indeed, they modelled a whole lifestyle for those who had just begun to climb the ladder of upward social mobility. The possession of these pictures, in a way, brought the owner closer to the hallowed circle of the fashionable, upper class gentry, providing him a means of annexing himself to the 'ideal'. This message is clear from the very conceptualisation and construction of

Fig. 129

Fig. 129
Babu Holding a Hookah
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 59

The babu depicted here as a dapper dandy is shown seated on an elaborately carved colonial chair sporting a chic *dhoti*, fashionable shirt, expensive shawl, heeled shoes, and an Albert hairstyle. Holding a hookah in one hand, he sits in a preposterous posture imitating popular photo studio portraits of the time.

In its essentials the image is quite similar to that of the god Kartika (*Fig.* 9).

the image. Unlike the deities, the babu is conceived of as the very incarnation of inaccessibility; somebody who has consciously distanced himself from the middle class, and unlike the latter, is clean shaven, his short moustache glued and shaped, his well-groomed hair, with side-parting, imitates the hair style of Prince Albert, an expensive shawl is thrown over his shoulders with calculated casuality; he is draped in a *dhoti*, that flaunts its fanning pleats and wears a shirt boasting of a fancy attached yoke. In imitation of his European masters, and unlike his brethren in the bazaar, wearing heeled and buckled shoes, he sits cross-legged on a colonial Victorian chair, demonstratively holding a hookah in his right hand and resting the left on the arm of the chair. Everything about him is exclusive and

Fig. 130

Fig. 130
Babu Holding a Hookah
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 128

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept of the babu in Kalighat painting, *see* caption to *Fig.* 129.

Fig. 131
'Well-Dressed Outside, at Home Musk-Rats Screech'
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on pape
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.117-1958
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

The Kalighat artists are known for their sarcastic caricaturing and lampooning of the decadent babus of their times. This painting depicts a dandified babu immaculately attired showing off the carefully arranged pleats of his expensive *dhoti*, while at home, in view of bankruptcy, nothing remains but musk-rats roaming at will.

The painting illustrates the Bengali proverb *'baire konchar patton, bhitore chhunchor ketton'*, meaning 'while he shows off the pleats of his expensive *dhoti* outside, at home musk-rats move about at will'.

Fig. 132

Fig. 132 (*see* page 221)
Oval Portrait
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 3349

Lockets containing miniature oval portraits of lovers, beloveds, and besotted couples were quite common in Europe, and half-length representation in an oval frame had appealed to the Mughal emperors too. That Calcutta dandies adopted the form is no surprise considering their patronage of Victorian chairs, the Prince Albert hairstyle, and buckled shoes.

custom-made. Sitting in his ivory-tower, arrogant, distant, and foppish, he appears to be the very fountainhead of vanity. It would be difficult to demarcate the extent to which the babu inspired the paintings and the paintings consolidated the image of the babu (*see* Fig. 132 and 133).

Though the term babu has been used in various senses, such as to denote an Englishman, a clerk, a master, a rich man, a Westernised 'man about town', anyone who could speak or write English, a teacher or any gentleman to whose name 'Mister' could be appended, the babu portrayed in Kalighat painting represented a particular type of young man who belonged to the class of the nouveau riche, foppish dandies whose half-baked anglicisation and sanskritisation had earned him the sarcastic title of '*ejuraj*', diminutive of 'educated raja', and '*phul-babu*' or the 'flower-delicate fop' who spent most of his time and wealth on courtesans.

Kalighat painting apart, this brand of babu was vastly ridiculed in the literature of the time and lampooned in plays. As early as 1825 Bhabani Charan Bandopadhyay[67] devoted a whole essay entitled 'Nab Babu Bilas' to the character, habits, and lifestyle of the babu. According to this satirical masterpiece, the young babu's education began at the age of five. He learned practically nothing other than writing a few words in Bengali. Then a Munshi was found to teach him Persian, but this was a boatman in an Englishman's boat office. For English, it was a Eurasian teacher, from whom all he learnt were words like goddamit, rascal, very good, nonsense, go to hell, etc.

To initiate the young babu in business affairs, palanquins, carriages, and pinnaces were ordered by his rich father. The choicest of *sherwani*s, pyjamas, *dhoti*s, turbans, and shawls were procured. Thus clad and transported, the babu visited business houses, auction houses, and law courts. After spending three or four hours thus engaged he returned home where, seated on his *gaddi*, he smoked a hookah and entertained himself in the company of sycophants, singers, dancers, supplicants, moneylenders and pimps. Some of the advice the apprentice-babu received from his more seasoned companions pertained to methods of consorting with prostitutes and fostering an image of a spendthrift, generous, and opulent man of taste by throwing lavish parties.

Having graduated to a full-fledged babu he held orgiastic parties at his garden house where fishing rods, tents, bedding, rose-water, perfumes, hookahs, tobacco, opium, cannabis, *paan*, alcohol, and food were sent in advance. The babu, accompanied by friends, also babus, went there in a luxurious carriage. Aging courtesans arrived, well-dressed, white-haired, flabby, and well past their youth with a convoy of young voluptuous women who had fine teeth, red lips, narrow waist, heavy buttocks, and were well-adorned with ornaments. Precious gifts were made to them by the babu, food and drinks served followed by *paan*, hookah, opium and cannabis. Some babus listened to music, others withdrew into bedrooms; some kissed and some embraced the women till the early hours of the morning.

Bhavani Charan Bandopadhyay's caricature of the new babu inspired Tekchand Thakur to go on to portray a 'half-educated scapegrace of a new-rich middle-class family'[68] in his novel *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1858). A few years later, Kali Prasanna Sinha published *Hutam Penchar Naksha* (1862) which too had a few sketches of the new babu. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's farce, *Ekei ki Baley Sabhyata* (Is this Called Civility) staged 1859, ridiculed the Europeanised scions of the *bhadralok* families of Calcutta who, under the guise of reforming Bengali society, revelled in drink and illicit sex.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, an Anglo-Indian comedian Dave Carlson staged plays at the then Opera House (today's Globe Cinema) caricaturing the babu. He advertised his plays as 'Dave Carlson *Sahab ka Pukka Tamasha*', of which one of the most popular was *The Bengali Baboo*. In *Meri Jan*, the 'hero Ramjoy Chunder Ghosh's attempt to learn Western music from an English lady to upgrade his own status in society'[69] formed the central theme. One of the characteristic songs of *The Bengalee Baboo* was:

I am a very good Bengalee Baboo
I keep my shop in Radhabazar
I live in Calcutta, eat my *dal-bhat*
And smoke my Hooka[70]

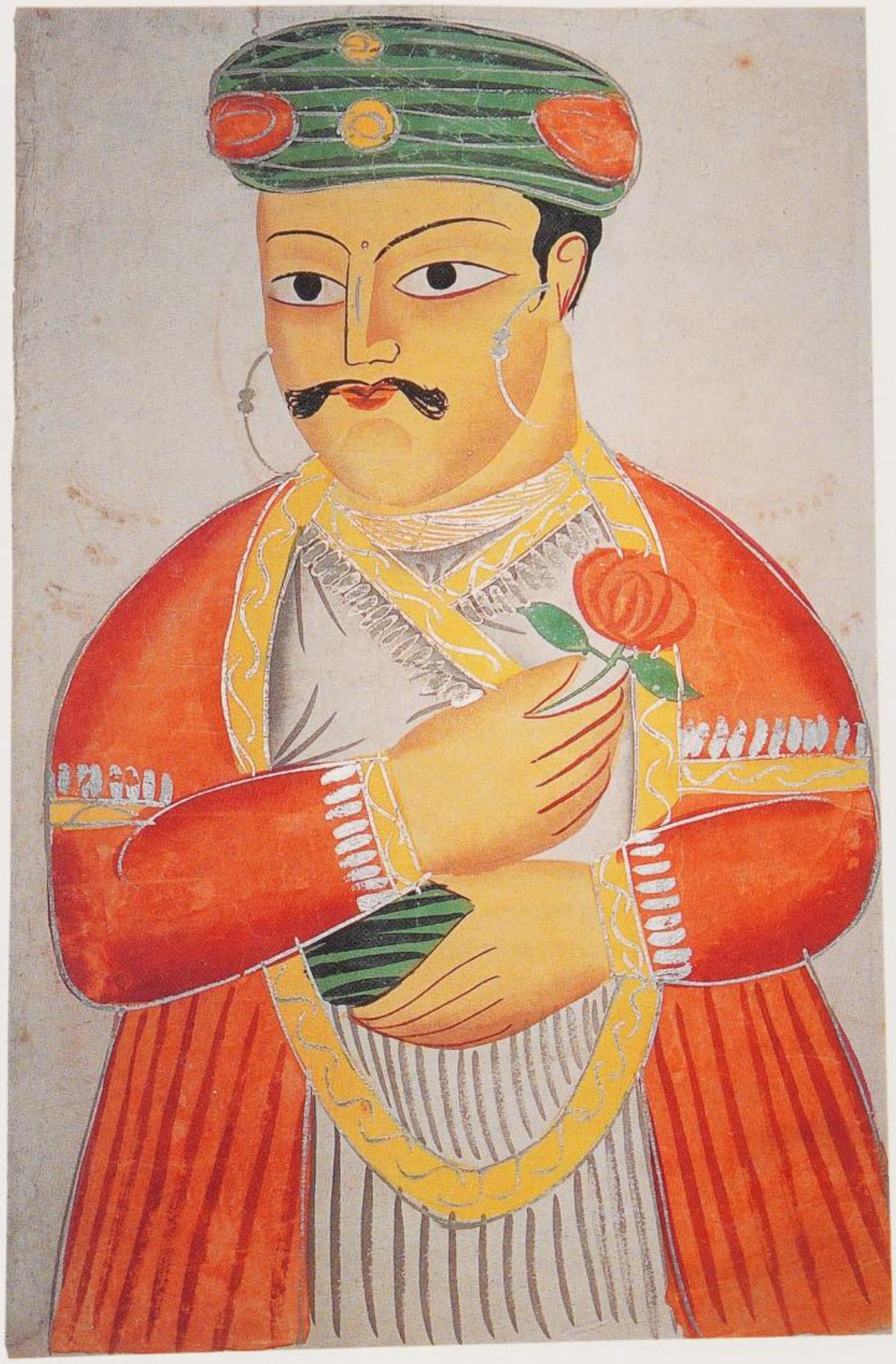

Fig. 133

Fig. 133
Man Holding a Rose
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 3842

The style of turban, general style of dress, and the shape of his moustache indicate that this is probably a portrait of a Marwari dandy. This should not be a matter of surprise considering the formidable presence of Marwari banians in Calcutta who worked for British firms.

It is notable that the period of Kalighat painting coincides with that of the above mentioned literary works of Bhabani Charan Bandopadhyay, Tekchand Thakur, Kali Prasanna Sinha, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and the *tamashas* of Dave Carlson. It is obvious that Kalighat paintings, as much as these literary works of the time, strongly reacted to the absurdities of babu culture and, undoubtedly, in the process of its portrayal, there must have been strong mutual interchange of influences between one medium and the other.

The rich babu's habits of throwing lavish parties, drinking, and womanising made him succumb to *'the charm of the prostitute* ... it was this theme—the power of woman—which came increasingly to be stressed in Kalighat pictures'.[71] Fig. 134, 135, 136, and 137 illustrate that the very Bengali male who had not considered a woman to be worth more than the shoe on his foot, now had, with his new Calcutta lifestyle, placed himself completely at her mercy, notwithstanding her penchant for thrashing him, snubbing him, or trampling him underfoot.

Fig. 134
Woman Beating a Man with a Broom
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 3

Many of the new babus of Calcutta, with their habit of holding lavish parties, entertaining prostitutes and sycophants; wasting money on buying expensive shawls, carriages, and jewellery, and later selling them off at half their price; spending their time catching fish, enjoying expensive meals, and attending evenings of dance and music, eventually became bankrupt. Once they succumbed to the charms of women, they were unable to do without their company and their own extravagant lifestyle. Penniless, they were ridiculed by their wives and mistresses. To find favour with women they debased themselves to the point of falling at their feet or even being beaten by them.

The Kalighat artists echoed some of these characteristic scenes of the babu culture of their times. Here, the woman's gaze is demonstrably directed at the onlooker as if broadcasting a didactic message.

Fig. 134

While talking of the new Bengali babu, mention must be made of the cultic image of the god Kartika in Kalighat painting, where the deity is modelled as a Calcutta dandy (Fig. 9). Lamenting the change, one nineteenth century eyewitness commented:

> During our childhood, the Kartika we saw was quite a handsome young man, with long and curled hair hanging down to his neck, a thin trace of a moustache, dressed in superfine *dhoti*, a light plaited scarf thrown around his neck and wearing a pair of gold-embroidered shoes ... But now, instead of his curly hair hanging down, we find him sporting the Albert fashion of hairstyle [after Prince Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria]; in the place of the gold-embroidered shoes, he wears English shoes and covers his body in a jacket ...[72]

Fig. 135

Fig. 135
Woman Beating a Man with a Broom
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 20

For a detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept and the treatment of forms, *see* caption to *Fig.* 134.

A Tamil inscription on the painting indicates that works of this nature were brought home as pilgrim souvenirs from as such far-flung areas as the Tamil country.

Fig. 136 (*Following page*)
Woman Reigns Supreme
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 11

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept, *see* caption to *Fig.* 134

A similar painting in the V & A collection (Archer, 1971: *Fig.* 59) bears the inscription: 'Sudeva Malati'. This, together with the curtains on top, indicates that the theme of male subservience to the female dominated several forms of folk expression and influenced one another.

It is interesting that the artist here, as was customary, has not attempted to 'shade' the woman's sari or the man's jacket.

Fig. 137 (*Following page*)
Woman Trampling upon a Man
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 111

For a detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept and treatment of forms, *see* caption to *Fig.* 134

In the conceptualisation of the theme of a woman jubilantly trampling upon a babu, inspiration from the conventional image of Kali dancing on Shiva's body cannot be overlooked.

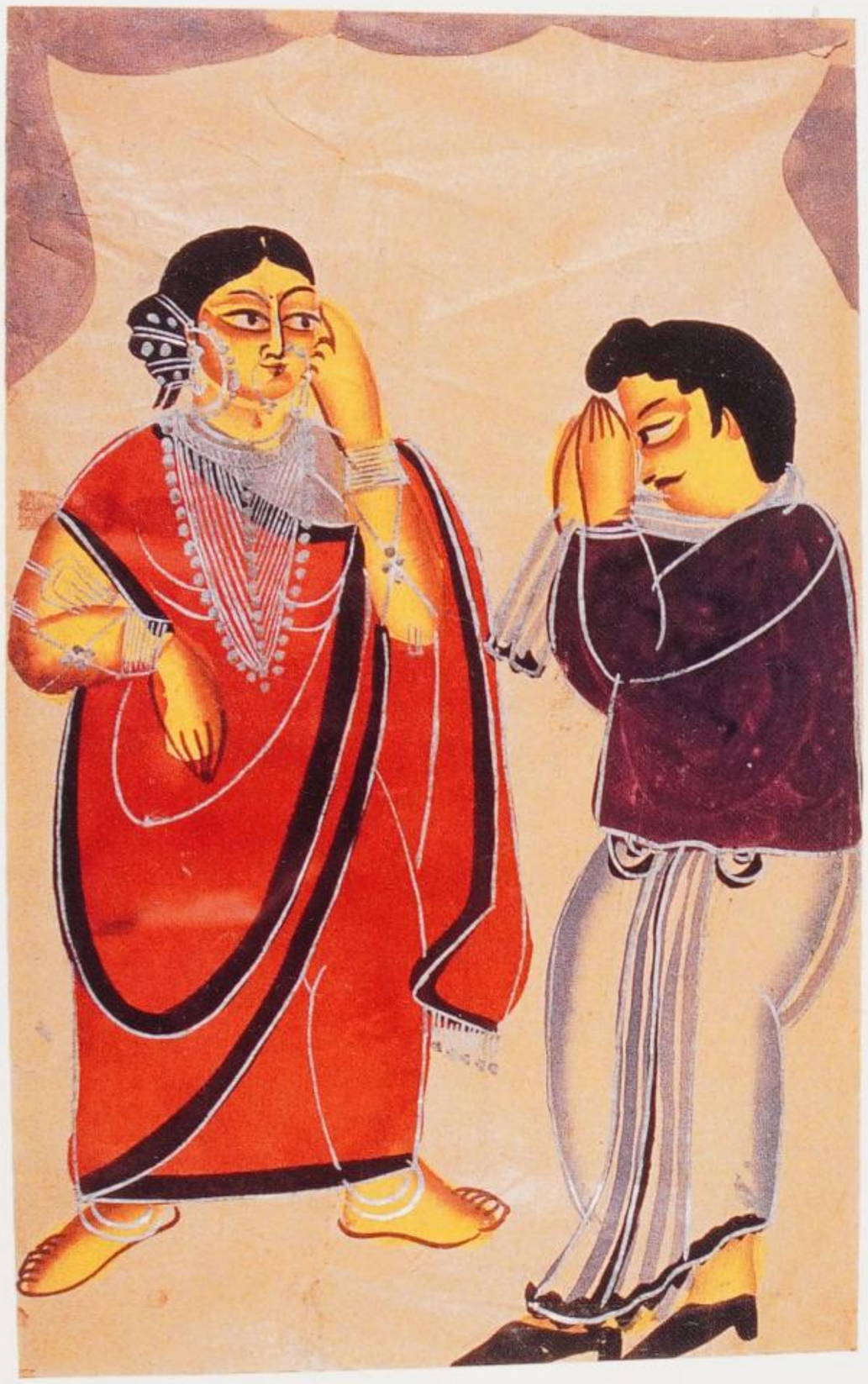

Fig. 136

Fig. 137

The Kalighat artists based their pictorial imagery on the common men and women they saw in the bazaar. In all probability the average young woman in the bazaar or the prostitute from the red-light area near Kalighat had provided the model for the images of goddesses or *nayikas*; a pot-bellied middle-aged shopkeeper might have served as the prototype for the image of Shiva, and clearly in the fashionable Calcutta dandy the artist visualised the living image of Kartika.

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1 Themes relating to the everyday life of the common man do occasionally figure in these traditions but the proportion is miniscule.
2 Raja Binaya Krishna Deb (1977: 104).
3 Quoted W.G. Archer (1971: 4).
4 Dhriti Kanta Lahiri Choudhury in Sukanta Chaudhuri (1990: 161–2).
5 Quoted in Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 158).
6 Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1992: 3).
7 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 195).
8 Ibid., 194.
9 W.G. Archer (1971), e.g. captions to Fig. 22, 23, 54, 77, 79, etc.
10 India Office Library, IOL-Add. Or., 906, published Knizkova (1975: Pl. 31).
11 Victoria & Albert Museum. I.S. 262 1955, published W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 54).
12 Rimli Bhattacharya in *India International Centre Quarterly*, Winter (1990–1).
13 Rimli Bhattacharya in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, no. 5 (1995: 12, 15).
14 Sukumar Sen (1989: 89)
15 Sumanta Banerjee (1998: 77).
16 W.G. Archer (1971: 11).
17 Rimli Bhattacharya in *India International Centre Quarterly*, Winter (1990: 146).

18 The F Series of the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, Worcester, Mass., USA

19 The only instance of the occurrence of this type of sari in a religious context is in Fig. 77 where Yashodha, Krishna's mother, is shown with the infant Krishna and her husband Vasudeva. However, it must be noted that Yashodha is not a goddess and the whole scene is conceptualised as a family photograph.

20 Rimli Bhattacharya in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, no. 5 (1995: 4).

21 Tracy C. Davis (1991: 132).

22 IOL–Add. Or. 906, published Knizkova (1975: Pl. 31).

23 The similarity has been pointed out by Hana Knizkova (1975: 67–8).

24 Bhuban Mohun Mitra, in Alok Ray (1974: 191–2).

25 Ibid.

26 Upendra Chandra Mitra *Rahasya Pratibha* (Calcutta, n.d.) vol II. 3rd ed.

27 Rimli Bhattacharya in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, no. 5 (1995: 12).

28 Ever since W.G. Archer (1971: Fig.18), dubbed this theme 'the sheepish lover', it has got cast in the mould of 'female ascendancy' but actually the theme depicts a tantric tale as we shall see in Ch. 4.

29 Victoria & Albert Museum Collection, I.S. 534-1950, published W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 52).

30 Rimli Bhattacharya in *India International Centre Quarterly*, Winter (1990–1: 146).

31 Sumanta Banerjee (1984: 196).

32 Published Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl.1).

33 Judith Mara Gutman (1982: 110).

34 Ibid., 99.

35 Ibid., 92–4.

36 Ibid., 35.

37 Angana Parekh in *Indian Express Magazine* (1995: 7).

38 W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 23).

39 In various traditions of Indian miniature painting, there are representations of *ragas* and *raginis* (melodies personified), one of which is *kakubha* showing a woman in the company of a peacock indicating her longing for her lover.

40 Victoria & Albert Museum, I.S. 262-1955.

41 W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 54).

42 Ibid., 59.

43 W.H. Hart (1885, rpt. 1990: 27).

44 Bhuban Mohun Mittra in Alok Ray (1974: 190).

45 J.C. Ghosh (1976: 151).

46 Bhuban Mohun Mittra in Alok Ray (1974: 191).

47 Quoted in Nisikanta Chattopadhyaya (1882).

48 Tanika Sarkar in *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity* (1997: 44).

49 References to these plays are made in W.G. Archer (1971) and Hana Knizkova (1975). Shripantha (1990), in his book *Mohant Elokeshi Sambad* (in Bengali) reproduces excerpts from several plays written/staged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century along with the comments on them in the press of the time. He also provides a list of 34 literary works on the themes, composed at the time (*see* pp. 71–2).

50 W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 30).

51 Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl. 115).

52 W.G. Archer (1971: 24).

53 *The Weekly Reporter: Appellate High Court, Calcutta, Criminal Rulings*, vol. XXI, 1892, 13–21.

54 Ibid., 15.

55 Also *see* Shripantha (1990); Hana Knizkova (1975: 45).

56 Jogendra Nath Ghosh (1873).

57 For a similar depiction in Kalighat drawing, *see* W.G. Archer (1962: Pl. VIII).

58 Jogendra Nath Ghosh (1873).

59 Reproduced Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl. 62).

60 Lakshminarayan Das (1873, Pt. IV., sc. 2)

61 W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 363).

62 Hana Knizkova (1975: 125).

63 W.G. Archer (1971: Fig. 37).

64 Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl. 122).

65 Tanika Sarkar in *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, (1997: 39).

66 Also *see* Hana Knizkova (1975: 63).

67 For full reference *see* Bandopadhyay, Bhabani Charan, in Bibliography.

68 J.C. Ghosh, op. cit, 127–8

69 Devasis Chattopadhyay in *Statesman*, dated 6 March 1993.

70 Ibid.

71 W.G. Archer (1971: 11).

72 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 129).

Fig. 138

Historical Understanding of the Kalighat Genre

Nothing is more natural to art history than to draw parallels between periods of culture and periods of style

Heinrich Wölfflin[1]

There could scarcely be stronger parallels in the history of Indian art between a period of culture and the span of an artistic genre than that to be found in Kalighat painting. The matching of the two becomes even more pronounced because, within a well-defined hundred year period (c. 1830–1930), the genre came into being, climaxed, and demised. This was a period that was marked by such unique cultural circumstances as, among others: the rise of the city of Calcutta as a grand metropolis that attracted to itself large-scale migrations of folk artists and performers (including the *patuas*, *kumors*, and *sutradhars*); which saw the introduction of new industrial products such as mill-made paper and watercolour, the introduction of a European lifestyle, photography, Western-style theatre, and a massive influx of European paintings and prints. With Kalighat painting, the artistic genre and the collective heritage from which it drew inspiration perfectly dovetailed. 'The effect of picture on picture as a factor in style'[2] is considered basic to an understanding of the development of style in an art-historical framework and therefore also for periodisation and dating. The case of Kalighat painting is however somewhat different. The genre's beginning and end seems to be quite abrupt. This is not to say that the origin of the genre was parthenogenetic or that there were no pictorial or other visual antecedents that generated the 'style', but so far, from the available evidence, it has not been possible to establish a step-by-step corollary of stylistic development to indicate definite continuity or sequential transition from any preceding pictorial tradition into the one under discussion. There appear to be certain inherent correspondences between Kalighat painting and the traditions of making and painting clay figures, or painting storytellers' scrolls by the *patuas*, or between the *sutradhar* carpenters' sketches and woodcarvings. Undoubtedly these pre-existing artistic practices and the related visual forms have substantially contributed to the development of the Kalighat idiom, yet the latter is nevertheless marked by such unforeseen singularities of conception, pictorial form, and treatment that for its principal impetus we must also look at extraneous circumstances, among which is the introduction of the British visual imagery.

Concerning the end, again it must be stressed that after the 1930s the idiom did not progressively grow, charting out ongoing development, but was subsumed in the medley of new techniques of mechanical reproduction, eventually to be replaced by them.

Let us first consider the factors that define the time of the beginning and the end of the genre and then proceed to analyse the

Fig. 138
Ganesha
Kalighat painting, 1854–5.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 4530

This painting together with *Fig.* 139 and 140 forms a part of the Underhill Collection put together in 1854–5 in Calcutta. The thematic and pictorial concepts of these paintings as well as their treatment of forms shows that all the essential characteristics of the Kalighat idiom had already come into being by the mid-nineteenth century, and indeed a decade or two earlier.

available data and the possible criteria for sequential dating of the paintings. Dating these paintings on the ground of stylistic features and development is beset with numerous pitfalls, a matter I shall presently address. For the date of origin of the genre, very little material is available and, as such, I shall have to rely on negative evidence. It has been pointed out[3] that in contrast to the indigenous work of the patuas which was presumably on primed handmade paper or cloth, the Kalighat *pat*s were painted on unprimed and unglued, machine-made paper of the newsprint variety that had begun to be manufactured in local paper-mills at least in the first half of the nineteenth century. So far no Kalighat type *pat* painted on handmade paper has come to light, and therefore it is not easy to ascertain whether early Kalighat type *pat*s were originally painted on conventional handmade paper from which the *patua*s eventually shifted to machine-made paper when this became available, or whether the idiom had its genesis on machine-made paper. The surviving evidence points to machine-made paper as the only surface used by the artists of the Kalighat *pat*s. Similarly, and in contrast to the conventional practice of the painters of Bengal and elsewhere in India, who used opaque pigments, the artists of the Kalighat idiom are known to have used transparent and translucent watercolours that came to Calcutta in the first half of the nineteenth century. Though both these aspects of material evidence point towards the first half of the nineteenth century for the origin of the type, they do not bring us closer to a more definite point of time when the idiom may actually have begun.

More reliable means of getting closer to the period of origin of the genre would be to follow the route of dates of the acquisition of these paintings for various European collections. So far known and published information about the dates of acquisition does not bring us much beyond the early 1870s, and even after allowing a margin of a few years before the date of actual collection when these could have been executed or the time taken in shipping them from India to Europe, the date cannot be pushed back much beyond the late nineteen-sixties. On the basis of the recorded dates of acquisition, and even after allowing a certain margin for somewhat earlier execution than the date of acquisition, as detailed in Chapter 2, it can be ascertained with a fair degree of certainty that the paintings in the collection of the Naprstek Museum, Prague, go back to the end of the sixties and early seventies of the nineteenth century; those in the Pushkin Museum of Graphic Arts, Moscow, to the early 1870s; those sent to the London International Exhibition in 1871, and now in the India Office Library collection, to 1870; those from the collection of Monier–Williams and now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, to the 1860s and 1870s; those in the British Museum collection, to the 1870s and 1880s, and the bulk of the Victoria & Albert Museum paintings on the basis of actual dates of collection, do not go beyond the 1870s.

While discussing dates of acquisition as one of the bases of determining the genesis of the idiom and the nature of the early phase of Kalighat painting, a reference must be made to the so-called Underhill Album containing, among others, a set of 22 Kalighat

Fig. 139

Fig. 139
Shiva's Family
Kalighat painting, 1854–5.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 4537

See caption to *Fig.* 138.

paintings datable to early 1850s, now in the collection of the India Office Library, London, purchased in 1991.[4] Dr Edward Bean Underhill, Joint Secretary to the Baptist Missionary Society and his wife Emily had visited Calcutta between 1854–1855 and during this period they appear to have collected these paintings.[5] These being the earliest dated acquisitions of Kalighat painting so far known, they throw new light on the inception of the idiom and bring into question several earlier notions on the subject. All the essential features of the style, i.e. iconographic singularities, characteristic figuration, blank background, bright colours, attempt at 'shading' or moulding to lend rotundity to forms, characteristic crowns, necklaces, and wrist ornaments, use of the daub technique, folio-size mill-made paper,

Fig. 140

Fig. 140
Chandi, Khumbana And Shrimanta Saudagar
Kalighat painting, 1854–5.
Watercolour on paper, 44 x 28 cm
Collection: IOL, Add. Or. 4519

See caption to *Fig.* 138.

watercolour, lithographic outline and detail picked out in silver, depiction of theatre-like rippling curtains and secular themes ('Courtesan Brushing Her Hair') are all to be found in this album. Since the paintings, fully endowed with the stylistic traits of the Kalighat genre, were acquired in the early 1850s, it would be a reasonable surmise that the period of growth of the idiom from the outset up to the time it reached this stage cannot have been less than ten to fifteen years. As such, the Underhill Album informs us that at least by the 1840s, the Kalighat idiom had come into being in its *essential* form.

The story of the end of the Kalighat genre is much less complex. One of the earliest recorded harbingers of the news of the decline of the genre is much quoted T.N. Mukharji who wrote as early as 1888 that by that time 'the industry is on decline owing to cheaper coloured lithographs, the *patuas* now paint rude *daubs* which were sold by thousands in stalls near the shrine of Kalighat....'[6] Mukharji contrasts 'a superior kind of watercolour paintings' with 'rude *daubs*', not specifying the criteria for the superiority or rudeness of the works and therefore not providing us any definite information about the nature and degree of decline. He does however blame the arrival of coloured lithographs in the market for the decline of Kalighat type *pats*. Writing in 1926, E.B. Havell laments: 'the last representative of the school in Calcutta, an old man of 85, is leaving, I am told, no heir or pupil to carry on the tradition....'[7] According to W.G. Archer, the last artists of the school, Nibaran Chandra Ghosh and Kalicharan Ghosh, died in 1930, and that Kanhai Lal Ghosh had ceased painting by 1932. Similarly, Mukul Dey records in 1932:[8] 'These pictures have now entirely vanished. The artist craftsmen are nearly all dead ... in place of these ... garish and evil-smelling lithographs and oleographs ... have come.'[9] It is an accepted fact that the *patuas* of Kalighat had begun to use 'lithography between the forties and the sixties of the nineteenth century'.[10] Several Underhill paintings collected in the early 1850s have a lithographic outline (Fig. 138, 139, 140); indeed, lithographic presses existed in Calcutta from 1824 onwards.[11]

What has been said above firmly places the beginning of the Kalighat type *pats* at least in the eighteen-forties. It would not be an unreasonable conjecture to believe that in the thirties of the century, a kind of 'proto-Kalighat' might have come into existence from which the more definite variety might have sprung up in the 1840s. If we place the decline and disappearance of the genre in the 1930s, then the life of the idiom can be fixed at a 100 years between the 1830s and 1930s.

Attempts at periodisation of this hundred-year span of Kalighat painting on the basis of stylistic development have

repeatedly proved to be futile. For one thing, there is no single unified, homogeneous style with a definite beginning, middle, and an end that can be sequenced in a neat unilinear path of development. As was seen in Chapter 2, practitioners of various art and craft disciplines such as *patua* (both as painted clay figure makers and painters and narrators of storytellers' scrolls); *kumor*, potters, and *sutradhar*, carpenters were involved in the production of these paintings, and each of these groups came from a different artistic milieu, e.g. the *patua*s of Burdwan painted differently from those of Midnapur, etc., not to speak of the individual sub-styles. Not only did their deep-rooted practice in their original disciplines determine the basic character of the work but, depending upon where the artists of the Kalighat genre worked, in Calcutta or in the interior villages; where they were sold, whether in the permanent shops around the Kalighat temple or at temporary stalls in *mela*s and weekly markets; how practised they were, whether novices or experienced masters, etc., also led to the generation of several idioms that belonged together by the virtue of certain common attributes popular at the time. These included the single panel painting, blank background, mill-made paper, watercolour, attempt at moulding or shading forms, etc., and were, for this reason, later clubbed together by scholars and branded 'Kalighat'. That is not to say that these and other attributes mentioned earlier, in combination with the common purpose and market they addressed, are not sufficient to form a composite category or genre. However, considering the diverse professional backgrounds from which the artists of this genre came and the highly variegated manner in which they responded to the changing lifestyle of the metropolis of Calcutta and equally variegated pictorial approaches that they adopted, one might wish to be cautious about bunching all their works in a homogeneous 'style' in the strict sense.

Moreover, it has been reiterated by several writers that the Kalighat *pat*s were collectively produced with the principal artist drawing the basic outline and the women filling up the blank spaces with colour: four or five women could colour two to three hundred *pat*s within an hour or so, after which the painter completed the outline.[12] Each Kalighat painting was thus the work of several hands, some accomplished, others faltering. In a loose situation such as this, certitude regarding an individual artist's style or that of a particular workshop or period cannot be easily established.

W.G. Archer sees the British and Anglo-Indian watercolours as important models for early Kalighat painting. Referring to 'Englishman on an Elephant Shooting at a Tiger', which he places in Period I (1800–50) (Fig. 141), he says: 'The pale and tepid colours, the chiselled precision of the execution, and the naively mannered use of shading (to emphasise contours rather than volume) all suggest the influence of Anglo-Indian watercolours of the 1780–1820 period but in a still undigested form.'[13] Archer also mentions the top hat and cutaways of the Englishman 'which were current between 1820 and 1830'.[14] Hana Knizkova agrees with him to the extent that the earliest paintings were marked by a flatter conception of forms and were produced when a strong feeling for volume had not been developed, when forms were

Fig. 141

Fig. 141
Englishman on an Elephant Shooting a Tiger
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S. 209-150.
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

either not shaded or shaded in narrow strips of a darker shade, and when the artists preferred tepid pastel shades to bright ones.[15]

Archer is of the view that 'as the school develops after 1850 ... British influence weakens ... shading is no longer treated as [an] awkward novelty ... its primary purpose — the creation of a sense of volume is better understood,....'[16] Knizkova too envisages a 'refined phase' and a 'summit period' that followed the initial formative phase in which 'sensitive hues are used in shading, chiefly darker tones of the ground colour and attention is paid to the transition from one tint to another, making certain that it comes about in gradual fashion'.[17]

Clearly, both scholars have adopted the position that 'shading' in combination with pale and muted tones and an underdeveloped sense of volume characterised the beginning of the style, and that as it matured there was improvement in these aspects. This theory then presumes that before the genesis of the Kalighat-type *pat*s, the artist's perception or depiction of volume was minimal or absent. We do not have substantial dated material to prove such a transition from the period of 'flatter conception' to that of 'better understanding of sense of volume'. If the *patua*s of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as scroll painters, are considered to be the authors of the Kalighat *pat*s from the 1830s (or earlier) onwards, and if the matter of origin and evolution of 'shading' in Kalighat *pat*s is to be the basic determinant of style (which it is), then we should have generically similar scrolls at least from the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wholly devoid of 'shading'. Most of the surviving *patua* scrolls are from the second half of the nineteenth century, and some of them do show familiarity with 'shading' which was either a remnant of an earlier practice, of which no early nineteenth century evidence has survived, or was an outcome of the scroll painters' awareness of the work of Kalighat artists (or directly of the British paintings) under whose influence they might have adopted 'shading'. In this context it must be reiterated that the earlier dual practice of *patua*s and *sutradhar*s in fashioning three-dimensional objects in conjunction with painting on paper and cloth cannot be underestimated as an important determinant of the 'style' of the Kalighat *pat*s, especially when their descendants are known to have been the authors of this genre and there exist stronger similarities between their three-dimensional works and the Kalighat *pat*s than between the latter and the narrative scrolls. As this aspect has been discussed at length, and with examples, in Chapter 2, I shall not elaborate on it here. The practice of the *patua*s and *sutradhar*s to fashion three-dimensional objects, and the possible continuity of this early experience in the later creation of Kalighat *pat*s is mentioned

here only as one of the sources of the striking demonstration of feeling for volume seen in them, but this is by no means to deny composite influences and inspiration, including that from British painting.

Let us take a few examples to illustrate how chronological analysis and periodisation based on style has often proved futile in the case of Kalighat painting. To go back to 'Englishman on an Elephant, Shooting a Tiger' (Fig. 141), which in all respects is an amateurish and crude work. Besides other features mentioned earlier, the fact that the Englishman is wearing a top hat and cutaways, it has been dated to c. 1830 by Archer because these were 'current between 1820 and 1830'. Interestingly, the top hat, combined with 'pale and tepid colours', also appear in a painting depicting 'The Mahant's Trial' (Fig. 127) in which the English judge is shown wearing a top hat. The palette here is much softer than in most Kalighat paintings and the devices of shading are varied and minimal. Apparently on these grounds, Archer had earlier placed this painting in c. 1845,[18] when he was unaware of the series of paintings relating to the murder of Elokeshi in which the Mahant of the temple of Tarakeshwar was involved. The murder itself occurred in 1873 and obviously therefore the painting could not have been executed in 1845. Archer corrected this error in his 1971 publication.[19] Top hat and cutaways also appear in 'The Mahant Works as Prison Gardener' (Fig. 142), relating to the same murder case, but now the painting is dated to c. 1880.[20] This shows that certain attributes, such as clothing style or even 'pale and tepid colours' cannot be reliably used as criteria for dating these paintings.

In this context, two paintings of the Tarakeshwar affair from the V & A collection need to be discussed at length. 'The Mahant Works as Prison Gardener' (just mentioned above) and 'The Mahant Turns an Oil-Press' (Fig. 142 and 143) are dated by Archer in c. 1880 and c. 1890 respectively.[21] These are rather sketchily drawn, hastily finished and marked by 'bold simplification',[22] and apparently for these reasons have been placed by him in his Period III (1870–85) and Period IV (1885–1930) respectively. The two companion pieces from the Pushkin Museum (Knizkova 1975: Pl. 21, 22) are strikingly similar in terms of the slipshod rendering of the subjects, figuration, and composition as well as in their stylistic attributes. Fig. 142 and Knizkova (1975: Pl. 21), which have the Mahant working as prison gardener depict a short and stocky Mahant watering a potted plant with a can while the towering figure of the prison warder stands behind him preposterously dressed in a top hat and cutaways. Both paintings share a close affinity in such details as the manner in which the Mahant holds the can with both his hands; the way he bends slightly while taking a step forward, the posture of the warder, standing with one hand on his waist and the other holding a stick. Similarly, Fig. 143 and Knizkova (1975: Pl. 22), depicting the Mahant turning an oil-press in the prison, belong together in all respects: the shape of the oil-press, the composition, the posture in which the Mahant operates the press, and the way in which the armed guard raises his right hand. The two V & A paintings do not differ in any significant way from their Pushkin Museum counterparts; indeed, the

Fig. 142

Fig. 142
The Mahant Working as a Prison Gardener
Kalighat painting, c. 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & M, I.S.113-1965
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Fig. 143
The Mahant Working at an Oil-Press
Kalighat painting, 1875–80.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.138-1914
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

similarity in conception and execution is so noticeable that both sets of paintings could have stemmed from the same workshop if not from the same artist. Now that the Pushkin Museum paintings are datable to 1873–4 on the ground of their date of acquisition, there could hardly be a justification to date the V & A ones to 1880 and 1890 as Archer has suggested, top hat and cutaways notwithstanding. In other words, there is nothing in the execution of these two sets of paintings that would justify two different dates.

As he proceeds to trace the 'history of the style', Archer assigns Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (Archer, 1971) from the V & A collection,

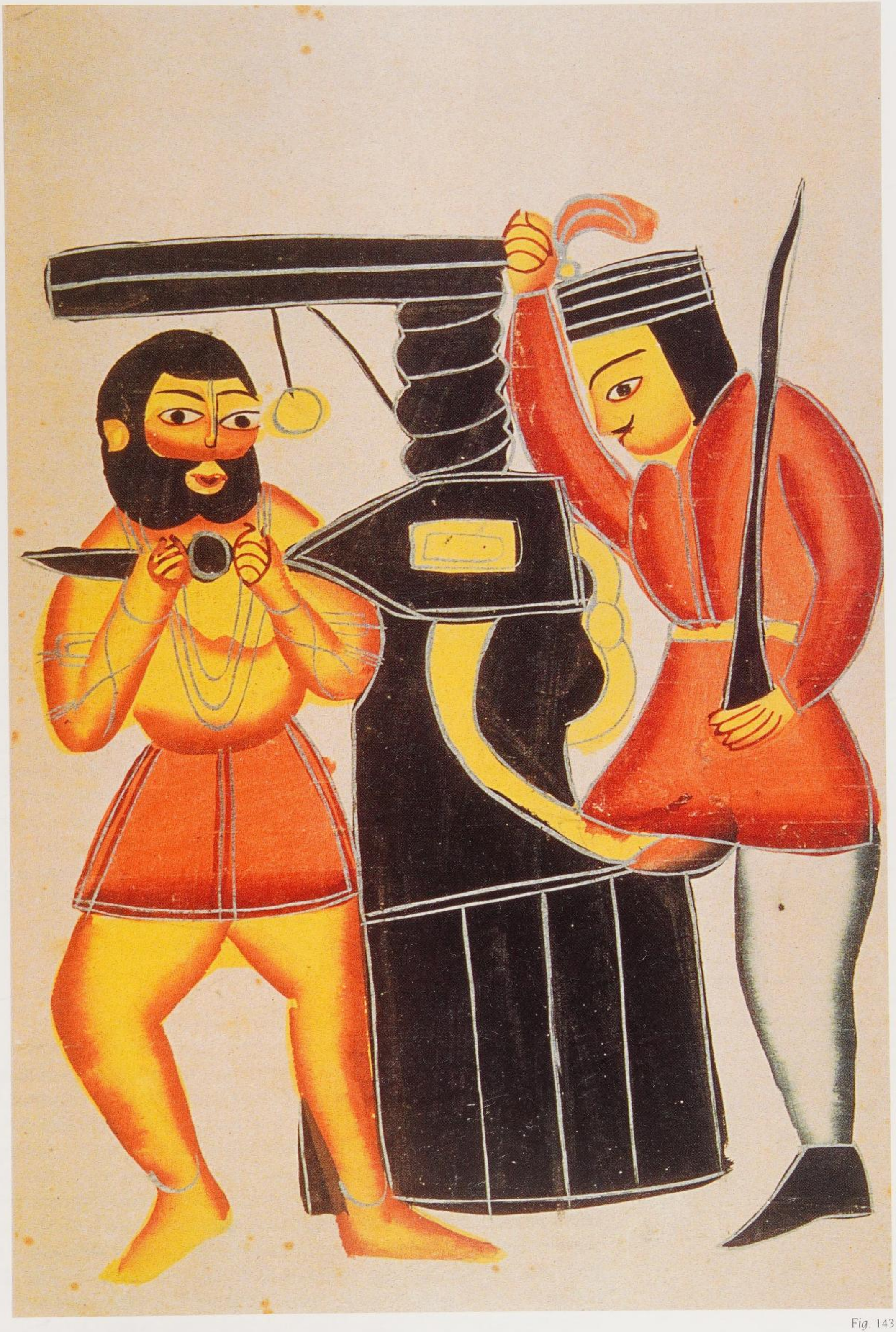

Fig. 143

Fig. 144

Fig. 145

Fig. 144
Narasimha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.72-1959
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

Fig. 145
The Mahant of Tarakeshwar or *Bhishti*, Water-Carrier
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 29 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.90-1955
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

depicting Narasimha, Varaha, a water-carrier, Radha at Krishna's feet, and Vamana quelling Bali respectively to Period I (1800–50). Archer's Fig. 4 and 6 are reproduced here as Fig. 144 and 145. According to Archer the most apt characteristics of these are:

> Instead of being fully rounded, the forms in early Kalighat pictures give the impression of being only shallow plaques—shadow falling on both sides of the object at once.... far from suggesting three-dimensional qualities, shading exists only to stress the outlines and enhance the general rhythms.[23]

In reality, Archer's Fig. 3–8 ascribed to Period I do not essentially differ from his Fig. 9–13 and 15–21, ascribed to Period II (1850–70) where, according to him, 'shading is no longer treated as an awkward novelty ... and its primary purpose—the creation of sense of volume—is better understood.... It is no longer confined to the stressing of contours but skilful gradations of tone are used....'.[24] If Archer's Fig. 4 (Fig. 145 in this book) can be ascribed to the period 1835–40, presumably on the ground of harsh two-sided shading and because here 'shading exists only to stress the outlines'[25], then how can his Fig. 6 (Fig. 144 in this book) 'Water-Carrier', which has much smoother and graduated shading be ascribed to Period I, i.e. c. 1830? By these criteria and due to strong stylistic affinities between Archer (1971: Fig. 6) and say figures of the so-called Period II (e.g. Archer,

1971: Fig. 19), should not his Fig. 6 (Fig. 145 in this book) belong to Period II?

In fact, Fig. 145, 'Water-Carrier' (Archer, 1971: Fig. 6), from the V & A collection needs to be examined in terms of its subject and dating against the background of its more complex set of circumstances. The painting is inscribed Bisti (*bhishti*) meaning water-carrier. In the Pushkin Museum Collection there is a virtually identical painting bearing profound affinities with that of the V & A and is also inscribed B*heestie*. As far as the interpretation of the subject is concerned, there are two opinions. Knizkova[26] identifies the Pushkin painting as: 'Tarakeshwar affair. Mahant Madhab Chandra Giri working as a water carrier [*bhishti*] in jail.' The painting is more definitely dateable to 1873–4 on the ground of its recorded date of acquisition. The V & A painting has been identified as 'Water-carrier' by Archer and dated to c. 1830.[27] The dating of the painting is intrinsically connected with an interpretation of the subject. Because of unmistakable similarities between the characteristics of the person of the Mahant serving a jail term in several paintings in different collections (some mentioned above, e.g. Mahant working as prison gardener or Mahant turning an oil-press), and the paintings under discussion here, it has been felt that both the 'Water-carrier' paintings represent the Mahant of the Tarakeshwar temple in jail. If this is so, as Knizkova holds with regard to the Pushkin painting, then the V & A counterpart cannot be dated to 1830 as Archer did because the whole Tarakeshwar affair started only in 1873. If we agree with Archer that the painting represented a 'Water-carrier' and not the Mahant of Tarakeshwar, then too several unresolved questions emerge. Firstly, the collector's inscription on the reverse of the picture itself raises doubts about the unrealistic appearance of the 'Water-carrier'. The inscription runs as follows:

> Bheestie' or Water-Carrier. Considerable allowance must be made for Poetic or Painter's license in this representation. The Bheestie in reality is anything but a swell, and the beard and ornaments exist only in the vivid imagination of the painter. Moreover, the implement for carrying water is simply made of a sheepskin and in fact when full looks very much like a sheep blown out. The only garment worn by the gentleman in question (as represented on the other side) is of a dirty white colour and certainly has no spangles on it.[28]

It is self-evident from this detailed and sarcastic inscription that the painting was anything but an authentic illustration of life in contemporary Calcutta as Archer envisaged. Indeed, the fact that the character is a 'swell' and that his beard, ornaments, his wraparound lower garment, and his posture, (slightly stooping as he steps forward) resemble those of the Mahant labouring in jail in other pictures of his and therefore lead us to believe that this painting portrays the Mahant. In that case, the picture has to be dated in 1873 or later. Even if we were to believe that the V & A painting represented only a water-carrier and not the Mahant, then too, because of the marked resemblances between it and the Pushkin painting which is definitely datable to 1873–4, it would be unconvincing to date the V & A painting to c. 1830 or 1840 as Archer has suggested. Not only is the

type and shape of the cap worn by the person in both paintings identical but also the scrolling-creeper pattern found on the water-bag and the form of the lower garment, including its dotted patterns and the motifs on its border; also similar is the depiction of the characteristic drapery folds, the posture of the character, the graduated shading of the limbs, and drawing of the facial features as well as of the fingers and toes. This makes it clear that both pictures belong to a single stylistic genre and therefore to the same period. Now that the Pushkin Museum painting has been dated on the basis of factual evidence to 1873–4, it would only be reasonable to date the V & A one to around that time. Just for argument's sake, if we were to believe that the V & A painting was truly painted around the 1830s and that the pictorial norms and characteristics established in that period had been carried forward by the next generations of artists right up to the 1870s (when the Pushkin picture was painted and acquired), then one would have to presume that in certain cases pictorial norms and individual styles persisted, virtually unchanged, for 40 years or more: an argument that will demolish Archer's painstakingly worked out periodisation of the Kalighat genre based on a conception of historical development of a style with recognisable attributes at the various stages of its journey. This example once again cautions us that contrasting and continually fluctuating factors were at work in the making of the Kalighat idiom; one could find, in a given period, as much homogeneity of style as heterogeneous expressions; as many fresh innovations as stale repetitions; as much striking individualism as collective generalities; and as much deft and sensitive handling of form and colour as the rude exercises of novices. In a fluid situation such as this, and in the absence of more definitively dated evidence, any attempt at devising imaginary stylistic periods would be futile.

While discussing the importance of historical events or personalities on the possible dating of certain paintings, a reference must be made to a number of paintings depicting a man combating a tiger (Fig. 146) which has been variously interpreted by scholars: 'Shyamakantha fighting with tiger';[29] or 'A man dispatching a tiger with his dagger'.[30]

Archer (1953) has published two paintings (Fig. 4, 24 dated to 1830 and 1880 respectively) illustrating the theme and has identified the man combating the tiger as 'Shyamakantha'('the dark-throated one'), supposedly an appellation for Shiva. In line with this interpretation, he goes on to detail a Hindu myth about how Shiva acquired the tigerskin as his loincloth. Shiva, as the 'dark-throated one', is usually described as *nilakantha* and not *shyamakantha*. On the other hand there was apparently a renowned wrestler called Shyama Kanta Banerjee in the second half of the nineteenth century who entertained audiences by combating live tigers. It is probable that Archer then, already had some vague information about the name Shyama Kanta and no more, and on the basis of this fragment of information interpreted the paintings in 1953 as 'Shyamakantha', mistakenly associating this with Shiva. Apparently, he subsequently discovered that there was a wrestler called 'Shyama Kanta Banerjee' 'famous in the eighteen-eighties and nineties for his wrestling

Fig. 146
Shyama Kanta Fighting a Tiger
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 21

Shyama Kanta Banerji (1855–1925), worked in circuses displaying his prowess in combating live, often untamed, tigers. He became a popular star in his lifetime and, as such, was glorified in Kalighat painting.

The somewhat earlier date of some of the paintings representing the same theme opens up the possibility that there was an earlier convention of painting the motif that later became associated with Shyama Kanta.

Fig. 146

matches with tigers'.[31] In his subsequent work[32] he has expressed the view that 'later versions of this picture came to be associated with a particular *yogi*, Shyamakanta Banerjee ...', implying that there was an earlier tradition of such paintings depicting 'Shyamakantha', i.e. Shiva, and only the later versions came to be associated with 'Shyamakanta', the yogi. According to Archer's account[33] of his career, Shyama Kanta Banerjee was born in 1858 and died in 1925. In the 1890s he worked in circuses where he wrestled with tigers and was also known to have wrestled with and subdued an untamed tiger. His skill in combating tigers brought him immense popularity and the status of a hero.

If the date of birth of Shyama Kanta Banerjee was 1858 then in 1873–4 (date of acquisition of the Pushkin Museum painting on this theme (Knizkova, 1975: Pl. 4), the wrestler would hardly have been 15–16 years old. It is unlikely (but not impossible) that at such a young age Shyama Kanta would have acquired the prowess to combat a tiger and become so famous as to be celebrated in Kalighat painting. If we follow this line of argument, Archer would be right in presuming an earlier tradition of this iconography in Kalighat painting not related to Shyama Kanta, the tiger wrestler, and that it got associated with him with his rising to fame and that therefore there would be justification in dating some of the paintings on this theme earlier than the lifespan of Shyama Kanta.

This, however, in itself, is not sufficient to justify for Archer (1953: Fig. 4) such an early date as 1830, which he apparently arrived at on stylistic grounds. Stylistically, this painting dated to 1830 does not in any way resemble others to which he assigns the same date. Archer refers to 'later versions of this picture came to be associated with a particular yogi, Shyamakanta Banerjee...',[34] when identifying the earlier version with Shiva, though no mark of that deity is seen on the person of the man who is actually 'clad in wrestler's shorts'.[35] It is certain that if there was a tradition of depicting a man combating a tiger prior to the existence of Shyama Kanta Banerjee then it was certainly not connected with Shyamakantha (i.e. Nilakantha, Shiva) and therefore the question of the individual to whom it was related remains unanswered. As such, the matter of dating these paintings remains partially in question until new evidence comes to light.

Using style as the basis of chronological periodisation, Archer goes to the extent of providing a 15–20 year span to stylistic Period II (1850–70) and Period III (1870–85). According to him, in Period II (in contrast to earlier works) 'the rhythmical arrangement of limbs, however, seems to have achieved a greater flexibility, shading is used to give an even stronger effect of concavity and the forms have sometimes an almost tubular simplicity'.[36] On these considerations, he placed the V & A painting depicting Elokeshi's first meeting with the Mahant in c. 1860 (Archer, 1953: Fig. 18) (Fig. 128), though it became common knowledge later that the entire Elokeshi–Mahant episode originated in 1873 and therefore the painting can be dated at the earliest to 1873. The focus of discourse here is not on factual errors but on the fact that given the multifaceted and yet extremely composite situation of Kalighat painting where several components of varied artistic as well as

cultural and commercial streams met and mingled, it is simply impossible to identify a unilinear pattern of growth of the style in neat sequential periods, with one beginning where the other ended. This was not a situation of a well-defined relationship between generations of certain families of royal patrons and those of artists who were attached to them, which would possibly lead to certain homogeneity of taste and evolutionary growth of style from one generation (period) to the next. The patronage of Kalighat painting came from the bazaar, where the client–artist relationship (and therefore the character of the producer) was more determined by the multifarious and continually fluctuating market forces than by the unified yardstick of the taste of a particular hereditary patron or the inherited style of an artist's family.

That is not to say that in the Kalighat situation there was no stylistic inheritance or continuity from master to apprentice but to stress that the degree to which stylistic orthodoxy persisted or innovative elements entered fluctuated greatly, and therefore dating these paintings by the application of principles evolved for dating paintings of the Rajput or Mughal schools would be a methodological error. Dating the above-mentioned V & A painting depicting Elokeshi's first meeting with the Mahant to 1860 serves as an apt example of such an error. Archer did correct several of the factual errors in his subsequent writings[37], as new information became available, but did not think it important enough to review his entire scheme of dating or its methodological basis in the light of new evidence.

After 1870, Archer perceived a crisis fast approaching the Kalighat genre. Now, according to him, 'execution is characterised by a considerably ruder energy. Silver paint which was formerly used to define contours is resorted to more sparingly. There is no longer the early sense of chiselled precision, and brush lines are in general much bolder and more impulsive.'[38] Now that both the Tarakeshwar scandal-related paintings, i.e. 'the Mahant's Trial' and 'the Mahant sees Elokeshi at the Tarakeshwar Shrine', supposedly possessed all the attributes of the so-called period of formation and the summit period, and earlier dated to 1845 and 1860 respectively on the ground of their stylistic attributes, are to be placed in the post-1873 period for factual reasons, it can be said that the display of a certain level of skill and sensitivity or perception of volume by the artist or even such concrete features such as profuse or restrained use of silver paint, etc., could not be taken for granted as dependable attributes for periodising or dating Kalighat painting. It is evident that there was a formidable coexistence and overlap of a variety of styles and workmanship. Orthodox individual styles may have persisted in some studio-workshops, while in others there may have been greater experimentation. The market was the principal determinant of workmanship (which has been mistaken by Archer for style in the case of Elokeshi's first meeting with the Mahant). T. N. Mukharji clearly summarises the situation: 'A painting in the old style can still be had, by order, at a price of Rs 10 and upward. The *patua*s now paint rude "daubs" which are sold by thousands in stalls near the shrine of Kalighat ....'[39] It is very likely that the neatly-worked out and laboriously detailed V & A painting of Elokeshi's first meeting with the

Mahant was one of the 'old style' works done specially for a client who had commissioned it at a higher price.

Let us return to the Underhill Collection of the IOL, datable to 1854 or a little earlier which, as mentioned earlier, embodies a majority of the attributes of the Kalighat genre. One of the paintings depicts Kali standing on Shiva (Fig. 29). A virtually identical picture from the V & A collection has been published by Archer (1971: Fig. 13), and dated to c. 1860. In terms of Kali's stance; the forms and gestures of her right hands; the emblems carried in her left ones; the shape and undulations of her garland of skulls; her long hair adorned with spangles, reaching her heels; her skirt made of chopped limbs; her ornaments; as well as the way in which Shiva reclines, with his left arm placed under his head, like a cushion, gripping a drinking horn; the way a cobra raises its hood from Shiva's neck, together with the use of lithographic outline, folio size of paper, and use of the 'daub' technique to paint the ground and minimal shading, both paintings appear to be works stemming from the same workshop, if not from the same artist. Now that we know that the Underhill painting can be dated to 1854, and therefore the idiom itself could go back to at least the late 1840s, there would hardly be any justification for the V & A one to be dated to 1860; not at least on stylistic grounds.

More often than not, scholars of Kalighat painting have adopted comparative stylistic analysis to project chronological periods in an evolutionary mould. Initially, batches of paintings are dated on the basis of certain factual information such as the time of acquisition of certain paintings or dates of certain historical events such as the Tarakeshwar murder, or the dates of certain historical personalities like the Rani of Jhansi or the wrestler Shyama Kanta. Once the dates of certain paintings are so ascertained, stylistic periods are constituted on the basis of perceived time-style correlations. Finally, these stylistic periods are arranged in an evolutionary sequence with a view to building up a methodology to date other pictures by fitting them in one or the other period on the ground of stylistic similarities. Such a method has been employed with some success in periodising works of art such as certain schools of Indian miniature painting or certain genres of Indian sculpture where the quantitative scale of the projects was comparatively limited and therefore the styles employed were few and not so variegated, and where the monumentality and prolonged time span of the projects had led to a degree of standardisation of certain artistic norms that their patrons admired and identified as 'style'(more as code) and used as the aesthetic parameter of their taste when commissioning them. Often a hereditary line of painters worked under the patronage of generations of a family or certain guilds of sculptor–architects worked on different assignments in a given area. All this may have made it possible, to a limited degree, in the sphere of certain schools of Indian miniature painting or schools of Indian sculpture, to establish norms for sequential dating on the basis of stylistic evolution. Indeed, even in a comparatively more compact situation of courtly patronage of artistic projects, the artists/their guilds are known to have taken commissions in distant areas, thereby

gaining new experiences that must have contributed to the evolution of their personal or group styles. The Kalighat situation was much more open and therefore even more susceptible to influences, and as it is said, 'the history of forms never stands still ... every form lives on, begetting, and every style calls to a new one ...'[40]

Until now, little known to the world of Indian arts, is the bulk of nearly 500 unique Kalighat paintings in the collection of Chester and Davida Herwitz. Considering the range of stylistic variations that the albums of this collection represent, it can be stated with confidence that they proclaim a sea change in our understanding of the notion of 'Kalighat style' and the problems relating to its periodisation. Indeed, the collection raises the question of whether there is any homogeneous genre that may validly be described as 'Kalighat' or does it represent a conglomerate of a variety of related idioms practised by different artists but loosely bound together by certain common attributes stemming from the typical transient cultural environment and artistic practice prevalent in the bazaars of Calcutta. I shall discuss factors relating to stylistic idioms in the next chapter, but for now let us look at some of the Herwitz albums and examine the implications of stylistic diversity on the theory of dating Kalighat paintings on the basis of the principle of stylistic infancy, maturity, and degeneration.

As detailed in Chapter 2, on the basis of affinities of several representative stylistic attributes such as the tremendously accentuated drapery folds and highlights; Mughal, or provincial *nawabi* court costumes combined with *jamawar* shawls, and an array of turbans worn by male Hindu mythological characters; female attire and ornaments; the demonstrative theatricality of postures and gestures of certain figures, etc., broadly visible in the inscribed wall paintings of Baharu, the Ananda Niketan canvas of Bagnan, certain wood carvings, sketches, and drawings in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum, and the E Series of the Herwitz collection containing about 90 paintings, it can be said with reasonable certainty that all these works belong to one generic idiom, the authorship of which can be ascribed to carpenters for the reasons advanced there. In terms of the above-mentioned attributes, the E Series differs from the majority of paintings of the A and F Series of the Herwitz collection which are again similar to most of the V & A and NAM ones reproduced by W. G. Archer and Hana Knizkova respectively.[41] The size of the paintings of the E Series is also different, i.e. 21.5 x 17.5 cm. On the other hand, on the ground of certain similarities of themes, flat backgrounds, graded shading, use of transparent watercolour, iconographic and figural correspondences, etc., this set cannot but belong to the spirit of the bazaar paintings of Kalighat and therefore there is sufficient reason to treat it as one of its variants.

The paintings of the E Series of the Herwitz collection belong to an album accompanied by elaborate handwritten notes of Rob or Thomas Macbeth. The first page bears the inscription: 'Rob Macbeth, Vicar of Marton, collected in India by my son Thomas Macbeth and bound up: 1858.' The set can therefore be dated to 1856 or at the most a couple of years earlier than the date of its collection. All the

paintings are inscribed in Bengali script and some in Roman script, describing the subject. The character of the Roman script is identical to that of the handwritten notes, a factor that definitely connects the paintings with the notes and therefore with the date mentioned on the cover page of the latter.

This comparatively early date of the album makes it evident that apart from the *patuas*, the carpenters were quite active in the souvenir market of Calcutta in the early 1850s and had by then already evolved a characteristic style broadly based on their drawings and sketches undertaken as preliminary exercises for carving relief panels and statues.

In the context of discussing the pros and cons of dating Kalighat paintings on the basis of an organic evolution of style, it must be mentioned that such a methodology would not be viable to date the E Series of the Herwitz collection which represents an individualistic voice within a collective tradition. Had this series been the only example of a distinguished style, it could have been treated as 'exceptional' but there are other 'deviant' series too, i.e. C Series and D Series which again are intrinsically connected with the broad genre of Kalighat paintings and yet appear to be highly individualistic. Both these series lack any documentary evidence that would enable us to date their origin.

The C Series has all the characteristic features of Kalighat, i.e. folio size; plain background; the same iconographies (Kali, Sarasvati, Durga, Annapurna, Shiva, coronation of Rama, etc) but is distinguished by such features as vigorously rapid brushwork, thick and protruding lips, eyebrows, and eyelids of characters; shading of limbs from one side; strong facial features and bold use of blue, red, and yellow. Another remarkable feature of this series is the indication of the sky by one or two whirling blue lines and that of the earth by pink and/or blue undulating waves. Since the pictorial idiom of this series does not relate to any of the dated pictures, and even the notion of evolution of style, with all its limitations, applied by Archer and others to dating Kalighat painting, is of no assistance; it has been suggested that a 'shadow falling on both sides of the object at once'[42] indicated partial understanding of the rationale of the 'British device of shading' and hence provided justification for placing certain paintings in the formative stage of the style. It must however be pointed out that there is hardly any consistent relationship between shading from one or both sides and the period to which paintings could be assigned. Several paintings from the dated series, such as the IOL (Underhill Collection), Pushkin Museum, or Herwitz series A (all ranging from the 1850s to 1870s) have examples of both two-sided and one-sided shading. It has also been construed that 'shading' effected with a 'narrow strip of darker shade stressing rather the outlines than giving volume to the forms'[43] was one of the marks of early stage of this genre. These criteria do not effectively apply to the Herwitz C Series where shadows fall only from one side (a supposed mark of a later stage of development of style) but the forms are mostly shaded in narrow strips of darker shade (an alleged indicator of the early stage).

Fig. 147
Radha in Possession of Krishna's Flute
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 28 x 23 cm
Private collection.

This painting collected from Shekhavati in Rajasthan is marked by fine execution of detail, a yellow wash background and rippled curtains on top.

Fig. 147

Fig. 148

Fig. 148
Shiva Expresses Remorse over Sati's Death
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 7

Series D of the Herwitz collection of Kalighat paintings is distinguished by the yellow wash of the background and the miniature format of the paintings.

Here Sati lies dead after leaping into the sacrificial fire at the ceremony organized by her father. As a repentant Shiva sits by her corpse, a vulture awaits its opportunity.

Fig. 149
Varaha, Incarnation of Vishnu killing Hiranyaksha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 39

The yellow wash of the background, the miniature format, and the peculiar, mouse-like rendition of Varaha who, tramples upon him and pulls out the intestines of his victim in the same manner as Narasimha of Hiranyakashipu, clearly demonstrate that the Kalighat genre had several unique idioms and interpretations. To dub it a 'style' or to date the paintings on the basis of stylistic evolution would not be feasible.

See caption to *Fig.* 151

One painting from this series depicts goddess Sarasvati seated in a lotus pond much in the way as in other companion pieces but here her *veena* is replaced by a violin. Some observers of Kalighat painting have suggested a later date for the entire series on the ground that a European musical instrument such as the violin has been depicted. This argument does not hold ground because it is recorded that the instrument was already used by the renowned *panchali* singer Dashu Ray's troupe in the 1850s,[44] and this may not have been the earliest instance of its use.

Once again, Herwitz D Series has virtually all the attributes of the style visible in his A Series (dated in 1870), and a majority of the paintings dated around that period in the NAM and Pushkin collections, but differs from them on two counts: small size (21.5 x 16.5 cm) and yellow wash backgrounds. The paintings in this series are somewhat roughly executed, often sketchy, half finished, and appear to have been done in a hurry. None of these factors throw any light on their possible dating because special commissioning of size, market pressure, or amateurish work could arise at any time. Yellow wash backgrounds (in the place of plain ones) offer no key either because the prevalence of wash backgrounds is seen in relation to paintings in a wholly different style and size (Fig. 147).

Paintings of the Herwitz C, D Series (Fig. 148, 149 and 150), and E,

Fig. 149

Fig. 150

Fig. 151

Fig. 150
Ganesha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 21 x 16 cm
Collection: Herwitz, D 43

Using the pre-existing Kalighat model created for the iconography of Lakshmi, seated on a large lotus in a lotus-pond, the artist has cast the image of Ganesha in a different mould.

Fig. 151
Narasimha Incarnation of Vishnu
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 28 x 23 cm
Collection: Herwitz, B 4

One of the few examples of Kalighat painting where the background is tinted with a flat colour wash, depicts Narasimha pulling out Hiranyakashipu's intestines.

The comparatively small size of the painting, tinted background, and simplified rendering shows that within the Kalighat genre there were several individual voices that did not conform to the mainstream.

See caption to *Fig.* 149

and a few miscellaneous ones from the B Series (Fig. 151) confirm that there were several stylistic idioms in which the artists of the broad genre of Kalighat worked. In such a situation it would be impossible to date paintings on the basis of stylistic criteria. The stylistic unity visible in each of these three series of paintings clearly indicates that each was the work of a single artist. Unless other stylistic variants of each of these series is available for comparative study and some corroborative documentary evidence of dating comes to light (as is the case with the E Series) all attempts at dating these paintings will amount to no more than conjecture.

The Herwitz A series is datable to the late 1860s or 1870 on the basis of the handwritten notes that accompanied the paintings. The notes, occasionally dated, cover the span of a year, from February to December 1870. This would mean that the paintings were either bought in 1870 or a couple of years earlier and the notes subsequently written. In terms of pictorial style these paintings closely relate to those from the NAM and Pushkin Museum collections, both dated to the early 1870s. Since about 63 paintings of the Herwitz A Series, 26 paintings of the NAM collection, and 62 from the Pushkin collection bear many stylistic affinities, and since all of them are datable on the basis of documentary evidence to the period 1870–5, we would be tempted to conclude that this was broadly the stylistic idiom of the early 1870s. There is no doubt that most of the paintings of these three dated collections were in the standard folio size, dealt with both religious and secular themes, were generally marked by graduated tones of shading, indicating that the vocabulary of conveying a sense of volume was not only better understood by these artists but had become their hallmark. It must however also be understood that because these collections were made in the early 1870s and could be believed to have been painted around that time, that is no reason to believe that their stylistic attributes were limited to that narrow period. The stylistic attributes of the paintings of the Underhill Collection dated to the early 1850s (which therefore presumably existed at least in the late 1840s) were not very different from those of the dated ones of the 1870s. If there is a certain diversity between the paintings of the 1850s and those of the 1870s, it need not always be explained in terms of stylistic evolution or degeneration, for there is always a possibility of stylistic variations since these could be the works of different hands.

A majority of Herwitz F Series also broadly affiliates with the A Series and as such with the V & A and Pushkin paintings. In F Series there are about 10 paintings bearing an inscription in Tamil, and all these are works of the same hand. A couple of these paintings relate to the theme of the Tarakeshwar scandal and therefore the series cannot be dated earlier than 1873.

Bulk production of the same thematic/iconographic type, often complete with the same stylistic attributes and mannerisms was quite a common feature and therefore we often encounter repetitive examples of almost the same picture type in Kalighat painting. Commercially successful paintings were replicated in larger number

than the rest. Some of these were the works of the same artist or the same workshop, others may have been copies by different artists. All this obviously led to large-scale variations of a type. Sequencing these variations as 'early'or 'late' on the basis of quality defined in terms of 'infancy', 'maturity', and 'degeneration' would spell a path riddled with pitfalls. In a complex and composite situation such as this, it would be more realistic to assign a broader span of time, i.e. 50–60 years, in dating a Kalighat painting unless documentary evidence indicates a more definite date.

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1 Heinrich Wölfflin (1929: 9).
2 Ibid., 230.
3 Hana Knizkova (1975: 29); Jayanta Chakrabarti (Santiniketan, 1986: iii).
4 Information from Patricia Kattenhorn. The IOL Collection of Kalighat paintings from the Underhill Collection bears the accession number Add. Or. 4517-38.
5 Unpublished catalogue information from the IOL, made available by Patricia Kattenhorn.
6 T. N. Mukharji (1888: 20).
7 E.B. Havell in *Rupam*, nos. 27–8 (1926: 77).
8 W. G. Archer (1953: 24–5).
9 Mukul Dey in *Advance*, (1932)
10 Nikhil Sarkar in Ashit Paul (1983: 43).
11 Ibid.
12 Dinesh Chandra Sen quoted in Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 133).
13 W. G. Archer (1971: 44).
14 Ibid.
15 Hana Knizkova (1975: 31).
16 W. G. Archer (1971: 9).
17 Hana Knizkova (1975: 32).
18 W. G. Archer (1953: Fig. 7).
19 W. G. Archer (1971: Fig. 38; 25).
20 Ibid., Fig. 40.
21 Ibid., Fig. 40–1.
22 Ibid., 15.
23 Ibid., 9.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl. 18; 188).
27 W. G. Archer (1971: Fig. 6) is dated c. 1830 in the caption whereas on p. 47 the same painting is dated to c. 1840.
28 Ibid., 47.
29 W. G. Archer (1953: Fig. 24).
30 Hana Knizkova (1975: Pl. 4; 187).
31 W. G. Archer (1971: 45).
32 Ibid.
33 W. G. Archer (1962: 9).
34 W. G. Archer (1971: 45).
35 W. G. Archer (1962: 9).
36 W. G. Archer (1971: 51).
37 W. G. Archer (1962: 1971).
38 W. G. Archer (1953: 11–2).
39 T. N. Mukharji (1888: 20).
40 Heinrich Wölfflin (1929: 230).
41 W. G. Archer (1953, 1962, 1971): Knizkova (1975).
42 W. G. Archer (1971: 9).
43 Hana Knizkova (1975: 31).
44 Sumanta Banerjee (1989: 107).

Fig. 152

Articulation of the Pictorial Language

A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been nought.

W. B. Yeats[1]

evocation of volume through line is a feat...

Leo Steinberg[2]

Call it 'shading', call it an attempt at 'giving volume to form', the intrinsic charm of the best of Kalighat painting lies in the vestigial rather than realistic rendering of chiaroscuro. It is this academically misunderstood, incomplete, deceptive, often non-functional but effectively abbreviated and earthy method of evoking an illusion of volume, so well articulated and perfected as to become a cogent tool in the hands of the Kalighat artists, that endowed their figures with such a sense of tangible sensuousness and unique enchantment. As is well-known, the Kalighat *patua*s had once been clay modellers and scroll painters. As the modeller's memory of perceived fullness of form began to get diluted by the newly found medium of translucent watercolours, the painter in him took over, and he once again began to model forms, but now speaking another visual language, i.e. that of a painter. This ambivalent liaison between the artist as modeller and as painter, to a great extent, determined the character of this genre of painting. He appears to model as he paints and paint as he models his forms.

The magic of clear and lucent watercolour completely captured the imagination of the Kalighat artists. Earlier, in the days of painting clay figures and narrative scrolls, the *patua* had confined himself to using flat opaque tones. With the coming of watercolour, he began to see the immense possibilities of graduated hues leading to discovery of shade and light, not as a natural phenomenon but as something that could emanate from his brush and be at his command. He became conscious of the unforeseen and often accidental effects that occurred on paper as capillary attraction between the pigment and the damp surface came into play. The lessons thus learnt began to become his tools, his technique, his vocabulary. Somewhere along the line he evolved an effective method of evoking volume in painting, not in imitation of nature, using heavy chiaroscuro, but conceiving it as a self-contained system of thinning and swelling contours and graded modelling of limbs from one or both sides, giving a sense of expanding pressure exactly where the bare background of the paper remained exposed; untouched. The translucent quality of watercolour opened the possibility of attaining a certain luminosity and accentuated highlights. These were lustily used by the artists to inflame the picture-plane for dramatic effect, especially visible in the emphasised drapery folds and bulging limbs of figures.

Fig. 152
Hanuman Ties up Ravana with his Tail
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper
about 44 x 28 cm
Collection: V & A, I.S.76-1959
Courtesy: 'V & A Picture Library'

In a reversal of the conventional notion of Ravana being a towering giant and Hanuman a small monkey, the artist has depicted Hanuman in majestic grandiosity and Ravana as a dwarf, defeated, and bound with Hanuman's tail.

To shade Hanuman's hairy body, the artist has abandoned the customary method of a single graded sweep of the brush and in its place has worked out the chiaroscuro with innumerable minute strokes.

The Kalighat painter did not aim at painting from life, capturing images frozen in the given situations of light and shade, with light falling on them from a definite source, generating a corresponding scheme of shadows, in order to achieve a realistic depiction of nature. He, in fact, worked with his fragmented visual memory and retained impressions of light and shade, form and volume which he retrieved and reconfigured in a pictorial scheme in accordance with his requirement of representation and interpretation. Indeed, it would not be surprising if the painters had begun to perceive volume in nature in terms of a vision that had grown out of their own style of painting chiaroscuro.

Often figures appear to be lit by multiple sources of light, depending upon the conceptual emphasis of forms required. By shading a limb from both sides or enveloping a space by gradually receding shadows, the artist created an illusion of rotundity or bulging form. A language so constituted was then used to portray a roly-poly sadhu, a pompous babu, a voluptuous courtesan, a pot-bellied Shiva, or a vigorous but slender Kali.

Let us examine a few typical features of shading attempted in Kalighat painting as it figured in different idioms of the genre. Though several individual variations might be visible within every broad idiom (*see* Fig. 152), and there might be scope for identification of more idioms or sub-idioms than are identified here, I shall presently discuss three prominently distinguishable types, i.e. works, in all probability, executed either by *patuas* or by those who followed their idiom (often comparable to painted clay figures, occasionally to story-tellers' scrolls, a type to which a majority of the known and published examples belong and one that is identified with 'Kalighat' in the popular imagination); paintings that are suggested to be the works of carpenters, on the basis of comparative study of identified paintings, drawings, and statues executed by carpenters (as detailed in Chapter 2); and at least one set of individualistic paintings in the Herwitz Collection (C Series) distinguishable for their highly stylised harsh shading and prominent facial features.

The works, generally assignable to *patuas* are marked by a characteristic system of rudimentary chiaroscuro in which roundness of form is achieved by graduated shading from both sides, sometimes this being more prominent on one side than on the other, but for no identifiable reason. The head, the torso, and the limbs of the same figure often follow different modes of light and shade, unrelated to one another. For example, almost invariably, the forehead, usually in 2/3 profile, is shown fully lit, i.e. unshaded, presuming top lighting, but the nose, which, was also lit by the same source and should appear equally bright at the ridge and cast a conspicuous shadow on the broader side of the profile for natural effect, but this is not the case here. Instead, the ridge of the prominently lit nose is marked by a strong outline. There is then graduated shading on both sides of the face, starting with darker shades at both the jaws, progressively fading towards the cheeks. A bare torso, again usually shown in 2/3 profile, follows a certain

mannerism. The upper portion of male torso is routinely marked by prominent contours defining the shape of the chest in one graded, continuous outline. Just below this standardised depiction of the chest, a parallel line is drawn in the ground colour of the body, below which the belly is marked out, usually enclosed on all sides by a graded outline, leaving the central portion in the ground colour (*see* Fig. 153). A bare female torso is invariably marked by voluptuous breasts, emphasised by graded contours; the rest of the treatment of the torso and the belly being the same as that for a male. Bare arms and legs are usually shaded on either side to emphasise fullness (*see* Fig. 154). Limbs covered with clothes clinging to the body are treated, for the purpose of shading, in the same way as the bare ones. Occasionally, the shading of one side of the belly, arm, leg or thigh is more prominent than the other but this is more on the basis of the individual artist's personal predilection than any principle of lighting. In other words, the face, the torso, and the limbs are conceived almost as separate entities with their own separate schemes of chiaroscuro, often unrelated to one another, and are joined together to form a composite entity rather than a single organic whole. The resultant overall effect is that of accentuated volume and sensuality not attained through realistic representation but by articulated stylisation. The sense of dimensionality perceived in nature is then internalised and reproduced on paper, fully transformed, according to the artist's felt need of expression. Though these features are found in most *patua* executed Kalighat paintings, Fig.78, 91, 135, 23, 155, 156, 157, 79 and 81 illustrate them most fully.

Fig. 153

Fig. 153
Shiva-Panchanana
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 39

In this one-man orchestra, Shiva-Panchanana, or the five-headed Shiva, the protagonist is playing a *damru* (drum), *tabla*, and *tanpura* with three of his hands while the fourth holds a drinking-horn.
In order to depict four frontal heads, as is the case here (the fifth is depicted amidst the cobra hoods), one would normally need to paint four pairs of eyes (i.e. eight), but here, using a popular device of painting a continuous chain of eyes, the artist has constructed four frontal faces but painted only five eyes.

Fig. 154
Ravana in Combat with Hanuman
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 192

Here Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, and Hanuman, the monkey-god and Rama's faithful attendant, are shown engaged in a battle of equals, in contrast to *Fig.* 152, where Hanuman is shown as a majestic figure and Ravana as a mere dwarf.

The single stroke delineating the contours of Hanuman's body is an apt illustration of the now well-perfected *patua* watercolour technique.

The tangibility of loose clothing is not shown through light and shade but through the way in which they are draped and their parallel curving folds. Usually, clothing, curtains, furniture, buildings, trees, shoes, musical instruments, or other such paraphernalia are shown devoid of any shading.

The Herwitz Series E, as much as its subject matter, is distinguished by its smaller format, the elaborate clothing of its characters, and the unique treatment of drapery folds, its completely different handling of chiaroscuro, and its well-finished and ornate

Fig. 154

Fig. 155

Fig. 157

Fig. 156

Fig. 155 (*see* page 222)
Angel Playing a Trumpet
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 123

Obviously derived from Christian cultic imagery, the angel is shown wearing a British crown, an Indian scarf, and characteristic Bengali ornaments, also to be found on the images of Hindu deities in Kalighat painting. This figure is one of the best examples of the Kalighat painter's technique of applying graded tones of colour to attain the effect of rotundity of form.

Fig. 156
Man Beating a Woman with a Shoe
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 146

The series of paintings of which this is one, also has a painting, with a Tamil inscription, that portrays Elokeshi's murder in 1873, thereby raising the probability that the entire series (*Fig.* 34, 35, 36, 37) was painted between c. 1873–80. The figuration and composition here too appears to portray the theatrical scene of Nabin striking Elokeshi with a fish-knife.

Beating a woman with a shoe was considered an appropriate punishment in the nineteenth century.

Fig. 157
Composite Image of Rama, Krishna and Chaitanya
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 156

One of the most characteristic cultic images of Bengal is represented by the composite figure of Rama, Krishna, and Gaur (Chaitanya), the last among whom was considered a great Vaishnava saint. The two upper arms, holding a bow and arrow, are of Rama, the middle row playing a flute symbolise Krishna, and the body represents Gaur.

The raw material for the construction of this innovative icon is partially derived from the pre-existing models of Krishna and Balarama.

Fig. 158

Fig. 159

Fig. 158
Shiva's Marriage
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21, 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 14

Here Shiva undergoing the marriage rites is shown as a tall, elongated figure. This, together with the colourless line drawing of the body and prominent marking of the knees, brings the painting into close kinship with *Fig.* 52 and 53 which are clearly the work of *sutradhar* carpenters.

Also *see* caption to *Fig.* 74.

Fig. 159
Composite Figure of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21, 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 18

furniture. The series is dated to 1856 on the basis of its collector's dated notes. As mentioned above, on the ground of comparative analysis of the broad data available, the authorship of the series is assignable to *sutradhar* (carpenters) (*see* Fig. 69, 158, 159, 70, 60, 63 and 160).

The most striking aspect of this series is its curious method of shading which is unlike that adopted by the *patua*s, described above. While the *patua*s shaded a form from both sides, the carpenters generally shaded it only from one side. Though this, in principle, appears to bring the carpenters closer to understanding the nature of realistic chiaroscuro, in practice their shading still remains half understood and decorative. The *patua*s, apparently, covered the face, torso, and limbs of a figure with a flat tint overlaid with a darker tone at the edge which they spread out by thinning it with water to attain the effect of graduated shading. The carpenters appear to have followed the opposite method, i.e. of covering virtually the entire form to be shaded with a darker tone, leaving a small space in the lighter tone of the background to give it an appearance of illumination. Here the light and dark shades are in sharp contrast and little space is provided for one tone to merge with another which makes the characters appear to be lit by a strong but a distant source of light, as one would have seen in the old-fashioned theatre. The *patua*s shaded by using a sweep of darker tone on damp paper that progressively faded out through capillary effect, whereas the carpenters generally shaded with tiny strokes of the brush and occasionally indicated sharply lit areas by lifting up wet colour with a dry brush or piece of cotton or just leaving it untouched. The highlights on Krishna's dark blue face, the chin of most characters, and the breasts of women

Fig. 160

Fig. 161

Fig. 160
Anandamayi
Kalighat painting, 1856.
Watercolour on paper, 21, 18 cm
Collection: Herwitz, E 41

Anandamayi, a form of Kali, is shown here astride both her consort Shiva and a demon.

Fig. 161 (*see* page 223)
Durga Annihilating the Demon Mahisha
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, C 5

Typical of Series C of the Herwitz Collection of Kalighat paintings, this example has been executed at breakneck speed leaving little scope for second thoughts between the ruthless movement of the brush and spontaneous emergence of powerful forms. This series is also marked by shading of forms from one side giving evidence of a better perception of chiaroscuro. Swiftly moving zigzag lines representing the earth and sky lend the paintings richness and vibrance.

wearing dark coloured blouses have been created by using this method of lifting up wet pigment.

The depiction of flowing garments with shining highlights accentuating their fanned-out folds is another passion of the carpenter –artists. Here, heavily gathered theatre curtains and full-sleeved and ankle-length Mughal gowns worn by Hindu mythological characters on the proscenium stage of the time appear to have deeply influenced the painters. Prominent rendering of drapery folds is attained by the same method of contrasting light and dark tones placed next to each other, allowing little graduating area between the two. In this series, the artist appears to be wholly mesmerised by the sharp contrast chiaroscuro and shiny reflections, often caused by theatre lights, and has indulgently used his newly found devices in their depiction.

The Herwitz Series C is in an unparalleled idiom. Here the figures are mostly lit from below, as if by footlights, casting heavy

Fig. 162

Fig. 162
Rat Justice
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz C 1

Fig. 163
Kali Trampling upon Shiva
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, C 14

See caption to *Fig.* 161

Fig. 164
Kamaley Kamini
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, C 15

In the story of Shrimanta Sadagar as narrated by the *patua* picture showmen, the goddess appears in this form to Shrimanta, the merchant-prince.

Also *see* caption to *Fig.* 161

Fig. 163

Fig. 164

Fig. 165

Underwater Life
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, C 19

Though natural history drawings had become popular in nineteenth century Calcutta under the influence of British patrons, this painting appears to derive inspiration from the twin professions of painting and painted clay figure making that the *patua*s practised.

shadows on the upper side of limbs and around the lips and eyes, making the latter appear to be protruding. Even the folds of skin of the neck and multiple tiers at the waist are prominently depicted as they would have been viewed on figures lit from below. Here again, shading is effected by single sweeps of brush speedily executed on damp paper, as in the case of the work of *patua*s and unlike the technique adopted by the carpenters of shading with tiny brush strokes. In these paintings the sense of volume is evoked by powerful sweeps of the brush swelling and thinning according to the perceived nature of the form to be shaded. Indeed, the brush dipped in colour is wielded so skilfully on the damp surface of the paper that due to pressure or lack of it, the graded contours get defined and achieve bounteous forms. Here, the line itself adopts the role of chiaroscuro (Fig. 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 105). Once again, the artist evades academic shading. Apart from using it as method for suggesting volume, the

artist of this series has used shading in a symmetrical pattern to obtain a certain sense of rhythm, as can be seen in the rendering of the multiple arms of the goddesses Durga or Kamaley Kamani depicted in Fig. 161 and Fig. 164 respectively.

This series is also distinguished by its treatment of the earth and sky. The artist, apparently with great delight, has used his brush with rapid powerful zigzag strokes in grey and blue to indicate the sky, and pink and grey to depict the earth (Fig. 163), displaying a taste for playing with his brush and creating abstract forms. This may be the only instance in pre-modernist Indian painting where purely abstract forms resulting from a playful, undirected movement of the brush have been consciously used by an artist who appears to have been revelling in the very act of painting; the mere act of putting colour on paper. The flaming effect created by the graded tones of each colour so used on the damp surface of the paper has thus been fully utilised and the pictorial value of the immediacy of the act of painting and the resultant forms generated has been realised by the artist as never before.

Each Kalighat painting reveals the complete stratigraphy of its construction comprising the basic pencil drawing (sometimes substituted by a lithographic outline); flat colouration; shading and contouring; detailing of facial features, toes, and fingers, and fine finishing of patterns on clothing and furniture, ornaments, crowns, haloes, etc., often picked out in silver pigment. In the case of these paintings, the 'study' and the final work of art were not separate entities but were layered, one upon the other. Between each two consecutive stages of execution, the artist had the opportunity to spontaneously improvise and articulate his drawing, composition, coloration, postures, and gestures, an opportunity he frequently seized to a great creative advantage. Though examples of such impulsive deviations from first drawing to final finishing, are many, where colouring may overstep the line or where the position of a limb may be altered on the spur of the moment by a more assertive stroke of pigment, the most striking illustration of the process can be seen in Fig. 166, depicting Shiva carrying Sati away on his shoulders, from her father Daksha who is halfway through the fire sacrifice. Behind the agitated Shiva's long and dishevelled hair and beard lurks a pencil drawing of another calmer depiction of his face showing his hair neatly tied in a bun, fastened with a cobra, and a shorter and well-combed beard. Apparently, midway through the execution of this painting the artist felt the need to depict Shiva in a wilder mood, infuriated by the humiliation caused to him by Daksha, rather than the usual calm and composed image that had been originally envisaged and drawn. Had the artist not been

Fig. 166

Fig. 166
Shiva Carrying Sati on his Shoulders
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 84

Unable to bear the insult to Shiva, her husband, received from her father Daksha, Sati jumped into a sacrificial fire and died. Shiva carried away her charred body on his shoulders.

An earlier pencil drawing visible from behind Shiva's image indicated that the artist had originally thought of portraying Shiva in a calm and composed form but on second thought abandoned the original conception in favour of an enraged Shiva with flowing hair and unruly beard.

See captions to *Fig.* 20 and 21

Fig. 167

aware of legitimacy of boundless freedom of expression, he would have timidly adhered to the original line of his drawing and produced a much tamer painting. Here, the possibility of saving on the cost of paper can be a factor, but since the initial drawing, basic coloration, shading, and final finishing were not all the work of the same hand, there had to be scope for improvisation at each subsequent stage of execution. Several instances of stratigraphy of 'second thoughts' in Kalighat painting demonstrate that more than economic reasons, it was their method of working that demanded the space for such a freedom.

As against the works of the *patuas*, in those assignable to carpenters, hardly any layering of 'second thoughts' or alterations are visible. This was perhaps because the carpenters were used to working on specifically commissioned jobs under contract for a particular client, and therefore were habituated to preparing detailed and finished scale drawings. This practice of theirs is clearly reflected in Herwitz Series E where the ground drawing, coloration, shading, and finishing do not infringe upon one another.

Undoubtedly, the requirement for speedy of production of paintings was one of the most crucial determinants of the Kalighat idiom. It was this factor that provided them with a certain strength, power, and energy rarely seen in Indian painting. Making out a case in favour of 'minute and laboured delicacy',[3] some writers have often failed to recognise the intensity and vigour generated by the vehement speed of execution and have, unfortunately, denounced it as a cause of for their degeneration. For Archer '... the process of picture making had necessarily to consist merely in their rapid duplication ... the use of broad and sweeping curves and the employment of ruthless simplifications were all encouraged by this stark and basic necessity'[4], while, according to Knizkova, the 'decline' in quality of the drawings occurred because 'it was not easy for the *patua*s to meet the growing market demand ... they had to alter the work process in such a way to increase the production ... they tried, in the first place to shorten the time needed to finish off a single work: they stepped up the tempo of the hand process ...'.[5] As has been mentioned earlier, T.N. Mukharji had as early as 1888 held the increasing demand for and rapid production of these paintings responsible for their degeneration: 'The *patua*s now paint rude daubs which are sold by thousands in stalls near the shrine of Kalighat ... .'[6]

Though it is true that there was a manifold rise in the inflow of a migratory population of pilgrims, tourists, and traders into Calcutta in the second half of the nineteenth century that led to rapid production of *pat*s as souvenirs, the pressure of swelling market demand playing a significant role, it would be unimaginative to consider rapid execution and the resultant simplification of form and brevity of expression as signs of degeneration. Indeed, it was this time pressure that eliminated any scope for an inert and aimless brush to produce highly laboured and ornate paintings in favour of sustained tension of forms and confident movement of lines surging towards their predestined targets, making them true works of expression. The

Fig. 167
Shiva Carrying the Dead Sati on his Shoulders
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 41 x 28 cm
Collection: BM, 133 358
1949, 4-9, 079
'Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum'

For detailed analysis of the thematic and pictorial concept, *see* caption to *Fig.* 166. A remarkable feature is the painter's treatment of Shiva's dishevelled hair and beard with deft touches of a damp, swiftly moving brush.

Fig. 168

Fig. 169

speed at which the paintings were completed did not just act as a mere means of enhanced production but became an essential constituent of the Kalighat genre. Behind each rapidly executed line or contour, possessed of all the charm of 'a moment's thought', lay the solid backing of immense practice and rehearsal that in itself is proof that the artist was using speed as an effective tool for the attainment of higher aims of pictorial representation.

The speed of execution brought in a sense of aplomb, confidence, and boldness to the paintings that infused into the characters depicted a greater semblance of reality, animation, and life (Fig. 167). It also introduced an element of raw force and movement, making the figures lively and earthy. It cannot be that the artists worked unaware of the painterly benefits to be derived from rapid rendering and did not use them to their artistic advantage; speedy execution and a degree of playfulness went hand in hand. Durga's lion, the demon Mahisha, Hanuman as Rama's devoted attendant or loyal lieutenant or bringer of herbs for Lakshmana, elephants lustrating Lakshmi, the mouse as the vehicle of Ganesha, the goose as a symbol of Brahma, cobras around the goddess Manasa, and the lotus plants

and lotus seats of deities were speedily executed, appearing, in their basic forms, as mere blots, smears, and waves to which identity was given by a minimal delineation of their repective characteristic features (*see* Fig. 90, 89, 119, 92, 168).

Apart from the need to cope with the pressure of the market or the artists' awareness of its creative advantage, speed of execution was also a technical necessity. The artist worked with watercolour, often on a damp paper surface, to obtain graduated shades as the colour automatically spread through capillary effect. If he did not work sufficiently swiftly, the paper and pigment would dry up, and the requisite graded tones and a certain quality of luminosity and brilliance would be lost.

Speedy brushwork also saved pigment. It was possible for the artist to cover a larger surface with less pigment if he kept pace with the paper's drying up process. This economic factor must have played a crucial role in the method of application of colour and the resultant visual effect, especially if one considers that earlier the Kalighat artists made their own opaque pigments by mixing pulverised earth, minerals, or vegetable substances with water and gum, whereas the new watercolours, mostly imported, had to be purchased at a comparatively high price.

Besides working on the damp surface with watercolours, another graphic technique employed by the *patua*s was daubing. They used it to depict a lion's mane, the foliage of trees (Fig. 169), a sheep's wool (Fig. 101), or the ground (Fig. 29). For this they dipped cotton or a piece of rag in the wet pigment of requisite shade and daubed with short tapping strokes.

A large number of paintings reveal traces of pencil drawing beneath the translucent watercolour or in some of the unpainted areas which were originally meant to be covered with colour but were left out on second thoughts. The drawing, though bold and self-assured, was minimal and primarily meant to organise the pictorial space and earmark the position of the figures as well as to indicate the iconographic or other characteristic postures, gestures, and emblems. As the artist who drew the first pencil sketch and the one who filled up colours were two different persons, the initial pencil drawing assumed great significance for it determined not only the design and composition of the painting, but also governed its overall cast. The traces of pencil drawing, where still visible, evinced a well-rehearsed and unfaltering hand behind it. The pencil, was an instrument with a hard tip in contrast to the brush; the drawing done with it had a graphic quality similar to that of engravings. Indeed, it has been suggested that the lithographic outline to which some Kalighat artists subsequently resorted was 'produced and modelled on original pencil drawings'.[7] One of the early references to a pencil in Bengali records goes back to 1856 .[8] The lead pencil was in use in Europe at least up to the mid-sixteenth century. Somewhere around that time graphite began to replace lead. A close ancestor of the modern graphite-based pencil cased in wood was being developed in

Fig. 168
Lav and Kush in Battle with Rama
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 55

After his coronation, Rama performed a horse sacrifice as was customary for universal sovereigns. His sons, Lav and Kush, bound the sacrificial horse thereby challenging Rama to battle.

Here the depiction of Hanuman as mobile blot of colour shows the Kalighat painter's strength of rapid but powerful expression.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Fig. 169
Krishna and Balarama
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 23

In a slight deviation from the standardised depiction of the divine pair as mirror images of each other, here Krishna is shown playing the flute while Balarama holds a calf in his hands. The foliage of the tree is painted with the dab technique.

The painting is dated to 1870 on the basis of a notebook of the time accompanying the album to which it belongs.

Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Little is known about the origin, shape, and material of the pencil used by the Kalighat artists of mid-nineteenth century.

Some of the earliest known examples of Kalighat paintings with lithographed outlines are datable to the early fifties of the nineteenth century.[9] There is an isolated reference to the existence of the art of engraving in Delhi as early as in the eighteenth century.[10] Several European-owned lithographic presses operated in Calcutta between 1824 and 1850.[11] Apparently, around the 1860s some of the Bengali students trained at the School of Industrial Art set up the Royal Lithographic Press. Considering the context, it comes as no surprise that the Underhill Kalighat paintings collected around 1855, and probably several others, which have lithographic outlines, superseded the earlier pencil drawings to which they have an obvious resemblance. Though *one* of the reasons for which the Kalighat artists were drawn to lithographic outline may have been market demand to which they could more easily cater by partially mechanising the process of production, it would be naive to believe that the artists had not taken to it because they were excited by the new medium itself and its visual effect and potential. On the ground of certain thematic and visual similarities, it has often been construed that the Kalighat 'style' had engraving as its basis; a view that needs to be revised. In a period of tumultuous confluence of new materials, techniques, and imagery, layering upon their pre-existing counterparts, the nature of artistic mediation in the Calcutta of the time cannot be seen as one-way traffic; in the present case from the Kalighat 'style' to engravings. Indeed, it has been suggested that Battala engravings predated Kalighat painting and also had a 'strong impact on the latter'.[12]

As has been mentioned earlier, after the first pencil drawing or lithographic outline, the painting was passed on to novices who tinted the limbs and clothing of figures with flat colours. The final finishing, done with graded tones and sweeps, indicating volume pulsating with life; drawing of facial features, toes, and fingers, and the bounding of forms in swift, fine, and unmediated outline, lending them a sense of spirit and energy often missing in highly laboured expressions, was apparently the work of the same bold and rehearsed hand as was the initial pencil drawing.

It has been customary in India for devotees to offer gems and jewellery to temples. *Shringar*, or the make-up of the sacred image, is changed more than once a day in most Hindu shrines, and the images bedecked with shining gold or silver ornaments and brocaded clothing to heighten their appeal. Even today, in the shops around well known temples of goddesses, glittering veils and plastic bangles embellished with gold paint are sold to pilgrims who offer them at the altar. Portable miniature shrines housing images of deities, installed in taxis, trucks, shops, restaurants, and homes all over India have a predominant element of glitter issuing from the materials chosen for their construction, i.e. plastic, coloured strips of glass, gold and silver paper, mirrors, and gold pigment. It has been recorded that innumerable stalls and kiosks situated in the bazaars around the

Kalighat temple conducted a brisk business in Kalighat paintings and painted clay figures throughout the nineteenth century (*see* Chapter 2). Today, the same shops in the same bazaars are selling brightly coloured prints and gold embellished plastic and plaster-cast images.

It is against this background of ritual conventions and practices that we need to look at the final finishing of Kalighat paintings with silver outlines. Crowns, haloes, a profusion of ornaments, borders of clothing, important contours of the body, the emblems of deities, musical instruments, and sections of sacred thrones were adorned with lustrous silver lines and dots. In some examples, silver is replaced by white pigment.[13] According to a chemical test, the artists used a colloidal form of tin for this purpose, which when burnished, shone like silver.[14] Kalighat paintings were cheap and popular cultic pictures and it would not be untenable to say that their prominent silver decor may have arisen from the custom of offering precious ornaments and gleaming clothing to deities as part of *shringar*. The glimmering portable plastic shrines and holograms of gods and goddesses we see today were, in a manner of speaking, anticipated by the Kalighat artists. The images they produced were the cultic holograms of the nineteenth century. It is also remarkable that most temple bazaars today sell religious images along with those of film stars and politicians and that the nineteenth century shop–studios of the Kalighat artists included the images of babus, bibis, theatre heroines, courtesans, renowned wrestlers, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, and Queen Victoria among their merchandise.

The Kalighat artist created an array of symbolic or emblematic rather than realistic imagery. He had at his disposal an inventory of certain stylised human forms from which he picked out the required type to cast an image of a god or goddess, a dandy or heroine, a courtesan, by endowing them with suitable garments, emblems, symbols, and other paraphernalia. He did not follow any of the rules or theory of art set out in the *shilpashastras* or the prescribed Hindu canons of art. He sat in the bazaar, watching the vendors of *paan*, vegetables, and sweetmeats; the nouveau riche babus; the fashionable bibis, courtesans, or fisherwomen. He carefully observed their habits, postures, and gestures; their manner of sitting, standing, and walking; their style of make-up and dress; their hobbies and pastimes. From these he cast gods and goddesses as well as celebrities, dandies, and 'public women'. That is why in the cultic paintings, Shiva, Parvati, and Ganesh moving out together do not look very different from the members of a middle-class family on an outing, or Shiva and Parvati riding their Nandi vehicle do not differ greatly from couples in wedding photographs personifying marital bliss. The images of deities were based on the common man of the bazaar, and once the typology was established, it provided, with some alterations, prototypes for the portrayal of new secular characters.

The language of pictorial narration was constituted with certain male and female types: young or old, standing or seated, single or a pair, etc. The artist 'created a whole stock of these types, common to religious or secular subjects.'[15] Building upon this basic vocabulary,

Fig. 170

Fig. 170 (*see* page 224)
Diana or Artemis
Kalighat painting, 1870.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, A 44

European prints depicting subjects from Greek and Roman mythology were in great demand in nineteenth century Calcutta. This painting appears to be an adaptation of the Greek goddess Diana or Roman Artemis, both associated with hunting.

There is a remarkable similarity in the posture of the goddess in this painting and that of a charmer depicted in *Fig.* 101. Kalighat painting derived strength from the innumerable visual references that were prevalent in the Calcutta of their time.

Fig. 171
Victim of a Charmer
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 112

Although the theme of a woman with a flower, leading a partly anthropomorphic sheep on a leash has been often identified as a 'sheepish lover', representing a weak male who has completely succumbed to the charm of a woman, here one cannot ignore the possible role of a popular belief that some women were possessed of a magical formula enabling them to convert a man into a sheep and vice versa.

Indeed, the latter interpretation would be more realistic in the light of this painting where the woman is in the magical act of converting the sheep into a man by putting a flower to its nose. A companion piece (*Fig.* 101), shows the woman drawing away the flower after she has done so.

Fig. 172
Jagaddhatri
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 206

In consonance with a practice common among the Kalighat artists, the pre-existing model of Durga has been slightly altered to construct the image of Jagaddhatri, the Mother of the Universe.

he generated a wide range of characters by adding distinguishing attributes to each. He constructed the image of Sarasvati (Fig. 91) or of a courtesan (Fig. 106) by picking out one of his stock images, showing a woman seated cross-legged, playing a stringed instrument. In the case of the goddess, he placed a crown on the head of the selected female type and seated her on a lotus in a lotus pond, and the same type reappears as a fancy lady or courtesan when provided with a pair of European-style buckled shoes and seated on a Victorian chair. Fig. 104 and Fig. 103 are further variations of the same figural type. Radha in Fig. 81, Elokeshi in Fig. 128, a heroine or courtesan in Fig. 114 and Fig.115, Parvati in Fig. 76, Sita in Fig. 119, and Sumitra in Fig. 69 stem from another female type, pulling her sari or veil over her head and shoulders with her right hand, forming a tent-like enclosure around her head and torso. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in terms of his fancy, a

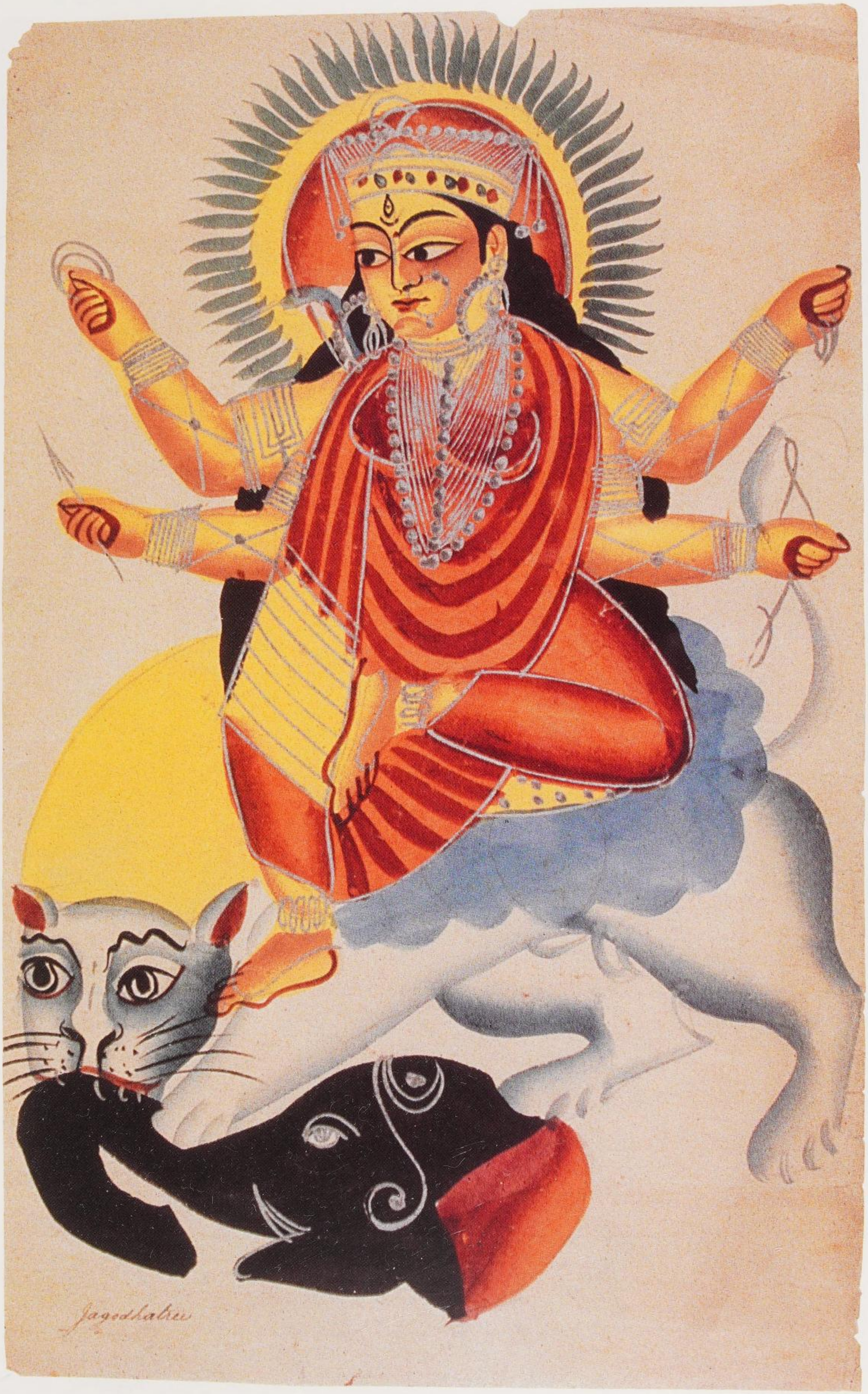

Fig. 172

Fig. 173

Two Dancers
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 151

In some of the Battala engravings, virtually identical pictures are captioned *sakhi-nritya* or 'dance of companions'. Using the mirror-image device, as was also the case in the depictions of Krishna–Balarama (*Fig.* 11 and 174) or Lakshmi–Sarasvati (*Fig.* 175), the Kalighat artist achieved a lyrical rhythm in his composition.

Fig. 174

Krishna and Balarama
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 96

Prince Albert style haircut, large earrings, the neatly pleated end of his dhoti, a modish shawl thrown over his shoulders, and buckled shoes of European origin, Kartika (Fig. 9) does not differ much from a Calcutta dandy (Fig. 129 and Fig. 130), both sharing the artist's stock image of a fashionable young man or the 'man about town'.

Equally typecast was the picture of a 'happy family', as in the Fig. 77 depiction of Vasudeva and Yashoda with the infant Krishna, and Fig. 72 depicting Shiva and Parvati with infant Ganesha. In both paintings the posture and outward gaze of Yashoda and Parvati, fixed on the onlooker, and the inclination of both infants to leap across to the other parent are very similar and appear to emanate from the same

Fig. 174

Fig. 175

Fig. 175 (see page 225)
Lakshmi and Sarasvati
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 196

The device of representing a pair by portraying two figures as mirror images of each other has often been used by Kalighat artists (*Fig.* 173 and 174) to achieve the charming symmetry and effusive rhythm that stems from such composition.

Fig. 176

Fig. 176
Maid Bringing a Hookah to a Lady
Kalighat painting, 19th century.
Watercolour on paper, 43 x 28 cm
Collection: Herwitz, F 109

Be it the depiction of a goddess or that of a housewife, a concubine or a prostitute, in Kalighat painting, sensuality was the single most dominant element in the portrayal of women. An experienced prostitute's advice to a young novice in *Naba Bibi Bilas*: 'Please your babu with sweet talk, enchant him with your looks; pretending to cover your head, show your high bosom' (Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay, 1831), appears to have been ingrained in the minds of the Kalighat artists.

Fashionable high society concubines and courtesans spent most of their time on make-up, smoking hookah, and chewing *paan*.

basic type. The conceptualisation of the divine couples such as Rama and Sita (Fig. 119) or Shiva and Parvati (Fig. 76) too appear to presuppose a stock type, especially remarkable being the identical rendering of both female consorts, including the way in which Sita rests her foot on Hanuman and Parvati on the bull, as if these were footstools.

One of the most noticeable images in Kalighat painting is that of a winged fairy, clad merely in a short skirt with a British crown on her head, holding a spear in her right hand and a stag in her left (Fig. 170). Her long black hair resembles that of the Kalighat Kali and her ornaments are no different from those of other female figures in Kalighat painting (compare Fig. 155). The image is clearly an improvised version of the Greek Artemis or the Roman Diana, the goddesses of hunters and animals whose prints might have been popular in Calcutta in the nineteenth century and may have served as

prototypes for this image. Interestingly, this figure, in turn, has become the model for another Kalighat painting (Fig. 101) depicting a notorious beauty of easy character who possessed the magical power of transforming a man into a beast and vice versa inconsonance with need and desire.[16] Each time the transformation was achieved by making the man/beast smell the magical flower (Fig. 171). The standing posture, the position of the arms, and the general figuration in Fig. 101 and 87 is virtually identical, leaving little doubt that the artist had derived this figural type, unprecedented in Kalighat painting, from paintings of Artemis/Diana and once he had the conception readily available, he apparently used it to cast the notorious charmer of the Bengali folk tale in that mould.

Another standardised female type, seated cross-legged with two of her arms bent from the elbow and raised upwards holding some emblems or other, represented Jagaddhatri (Fig. 172), Manasa (Fig. 90), Lakshmi (Fig. 92), or Ganga (Fig. 15) and, depending upon her seat, or vehicle, carrying particular emblems in her multiple arms and other typical iconographic features.

The artists had a ready 'mould' for standing figures of human or divine pairs such as Two Dancers (Fig. 173), Krishna and Balarama (Fig. 174, and Fig. 11), or Lakshmi and Sarasvati (Fig. 175). In all such pairs each figure was a mirror image of the other, with slight variations of iconographic detail in the case of divine ones.

The Kalighat artist used rather simple figuration and compositional devices. As the artists of the Rajput and Pahari schools of miniature painting were generally comfortable with the full profile or one side of the face, the Kalighat artists were at ease depicting the face and body in 2/3 profile. There are very few instances of full profile, e.g. the barber in Fig. 118 cleaning the ear of a lady or the lady's female attendant depicted in Fig. 176. In both instances the face of the character shown in full profile appears bloated and chinless.

All the paintings were executed on a rectangular sheet of paper and almost invariably in vertical format. The convention of vertical paintings apparently led to its simple vertical division into two symmetrical halves. In paintings with a single image, an imaginary central vertical line would, almost precisely divide the figure into halves, and in a majority of cases of double image, each would appear to share equal space. Though there are several other compositional variations in Kalighat painting, these appear to rotate around the basic notion of symmetrical vertical division.

Thematically and conceptually, the paintings can be broadly divided into emblematic and narrative types. For the limited purpose of analysis, we may include the cultic images of Durga, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Kartika, etc., or the secular images of babus and courtesans in the emblematic class and the more illustrative variety, such as that representing the Tarakeshwar affair, in the narrative category. However, such a division cannot be envisaged in terms of rigid classification as every so-called emblematic painting would have a mythological or

social context, and to that extent would incorporate certain narrative elements. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the *patuas*, *sutradhars*, and *kumors* were rooted in the dual professional practice of painting as well as fashioning three-dimensional objects. In the Kalighat context, the latter practice apparently contributed to their blank backgrounds and unified emblematic conceptualisation of images whereas their respective practices of painting (the scroll painting of the *patuas*; the chariot covers, Durga and Kali puja panels of the carpenters, and the *sharas* and *chalchitras* of potters), which involved 'description', helped them in their pictorial narration of legends and episodes. It must however be added here that neither in their emblematic nor in their narrative works did the artists in the Kalighat context literally go back to any of these supposedly earlier practices of theirs. The new genre of Kalighat had resulted from many complexly layered mediations which included the impact of new art materials and techniques of painting, exposure to new European imagery, the rise of new technology of mechanical reproduction, the demands of the souvenir market, etc. All this had brought about a complete transformation of pictorial language from the times of painting scrolls, panels, *chalchitras* or modelling clay images or carving wooden panels and figures, to the days of Kalighat painting.

Even the expressly narrative subjects, such as the Tarakeshwar affair, which entailed sequential unfolding of the story, running across several painting, did not invite recourse to the pre-existing model of narrative scroll painting where each episode was placed within its conceived physical environment created by elaborate depiction of trees, rivers, palaces, etc.

The narrative language used by the Kalighat artist in the pictorialisation of the Tarakeshwar affair tended to be brief and cryptic; more emblematic than descriptive. For instance, the paintings depicting the Mahant of Tarakeshwar in the company of Elokeshi or Elokeshi with her husband Nabin show their figures against the same blank background as in the case of the iconographic imagery of Shiva, Ganesha, Durga, etc., devoid of any detail of a specific locale, such as a bedroom or a living room or a landscape.

Interestingly, as was noted earlier, the episodes of the Tarakeshwar affair, which were painted as separate individual panels, were not necessarily meant to be acquired by the buyers as full sets. Albums collected in the nineteenth century show that each buyer bought a couple of them as independent paintings, depending upon his/her moral or personal preferences, acquiring cultic paintings on the basis of individual faith and belief. The practice of executing separate individual paintings as against running scrolls became the hallmark of the Kalighat genre. Though the series of paintings related to the Tarakeshwar affair too were a result of the established norms of painting of that time (blank backgrounds, emblematic rather than descriptive, and synoptic rather than elaborate) but, as mentioned in Chapter 3, these were like stills from theatrical performances centring around the affair. Their narrative devices resembled the theatrical enactment of the related plays rather than those employed in the

storytellers' scrolls. In other words, here the artists were talking in two languages, i.e. one of painting and another of theatre.

The introduction of photography, Western-style theatre, and the techniques of mechanical replication of images, in combination with the import of new artists' materials and fancy goods projecting the European lifestyle into the Calcutta of the nineteenth century strongly influenced the pictorial norms of Kalighat painting, reflecting their influence on aspects of their composition and layout of figures as well as in dress, postures, gestures, and the gazes of the characters depicted. This point has been discussed at length in Chapter 3 and therefore need not again be dealt with here.

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1 W.B.Yeats (1967: 88).
2 Leo Steinberg (1972: 255).
3 W. G. Archer (1971: 7).
4 Ibid.
5 Hana Knizkova (1975: 35–6).
6 T.N. Mukharji (1888: 20).
7 Hana Knizkova (1975: 5–6).
8 Kristo Doss Paul (1856: 21–3).
9 E.g. some of the paintings from the Underhill Collection in the IOL which have lithographic outlines and which were collected in around 1854–55.
10 Ahsan Jan Qaisal (1998: 102).
11 Nikhil Sarkar *in* Ashit Paul (1983: 43).
12 B.S. Kesavan (1985: 287).
13 E.g. British Museum, nos. 1950–10–14: 10, 12, 13, 14, 16.
14 Hana Knizkova (1975: 8).
15 Ibid., 4.
16 Fig. F 132 of the Herwitz Collection has the following inscription: 'In the folk tale there was a notorious beauty of easy character, who had the power of transforming human beings into beasts and making them charmed by her menageries'. Also *see* Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Brihat Banga*, Part I, Reprint, 1993, 581, wherein there is a reference to the ancient temple of Kamarupa Kamakhya being a centre for tantric practices. The women from there were known for secretly placing a small thing in the hair of the men after reciting a *mantra*. This turned the man into a sheep. The practice was so popular in those days that the *patua*s painted pictures of it.

Album Section

Captions

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Page 206: *Fig.* 35 **Reconciliation of Elokeshi and Nabin** (*see* page 43)

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Page 210: *Fig.* 73 **Shiva Carrying the Infant Ganesha on his Lap** (*see* page 80)

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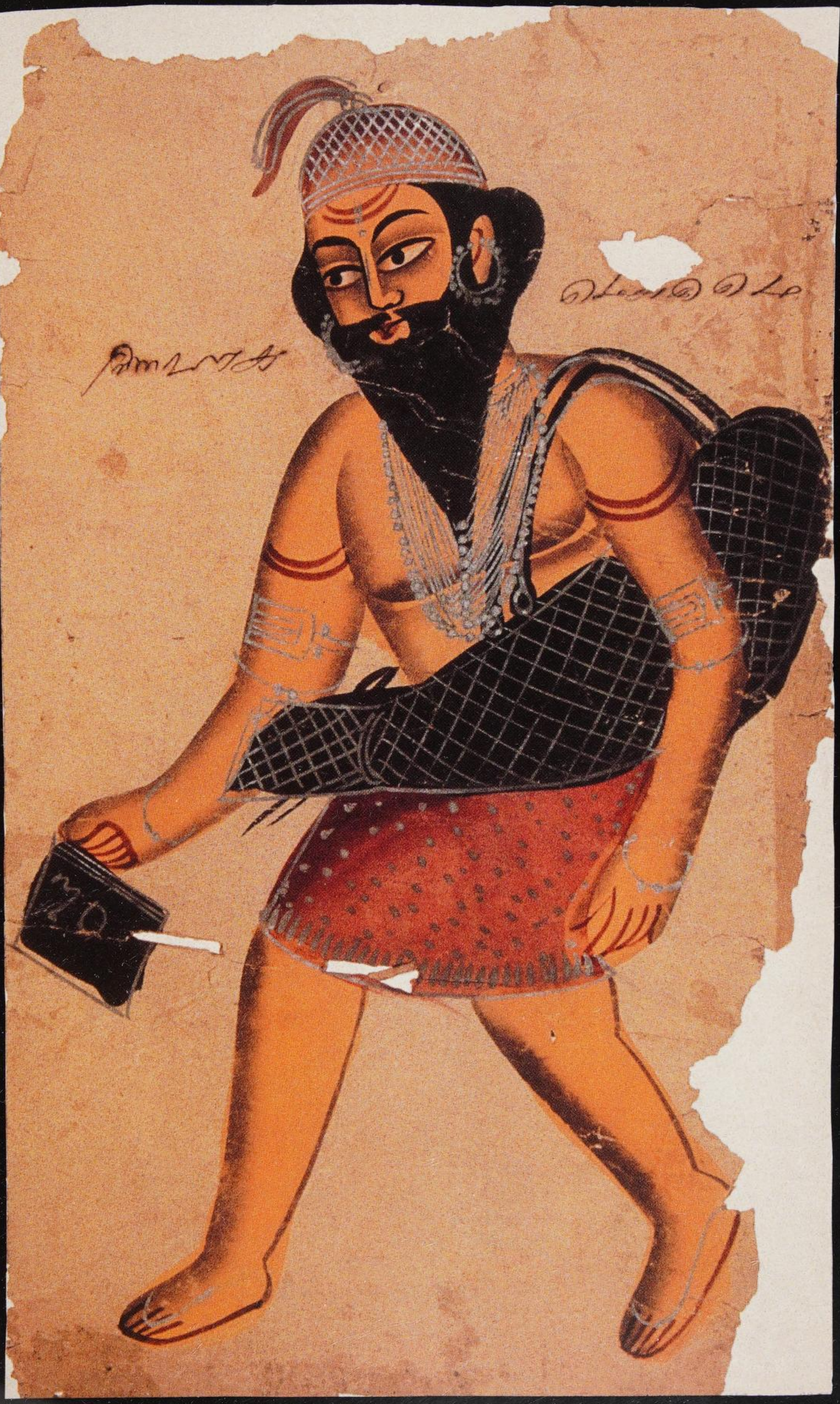
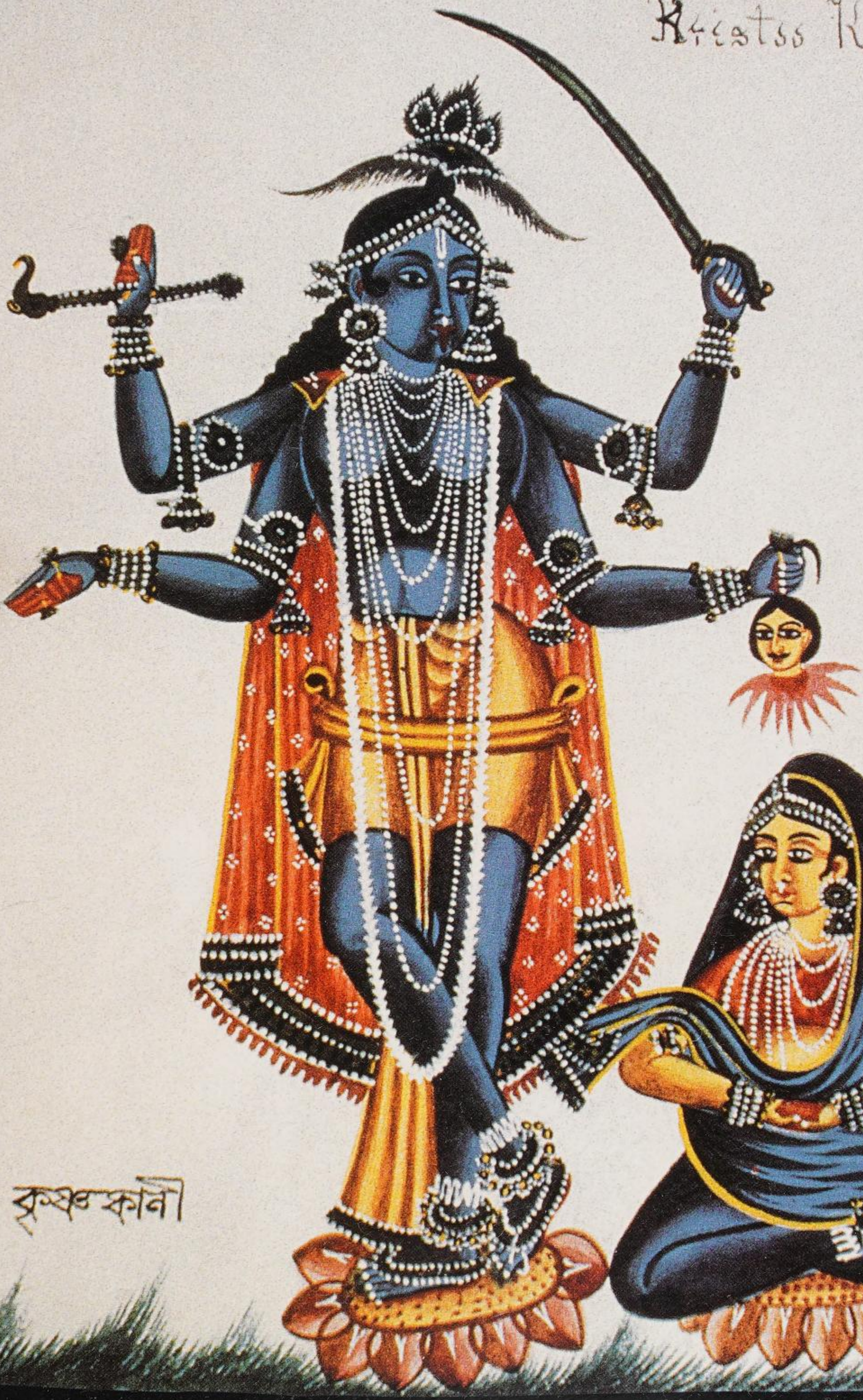
Kartick on Peacock



রাধাকৃষ্ণ — Radha Krishtoo

কৌমারি

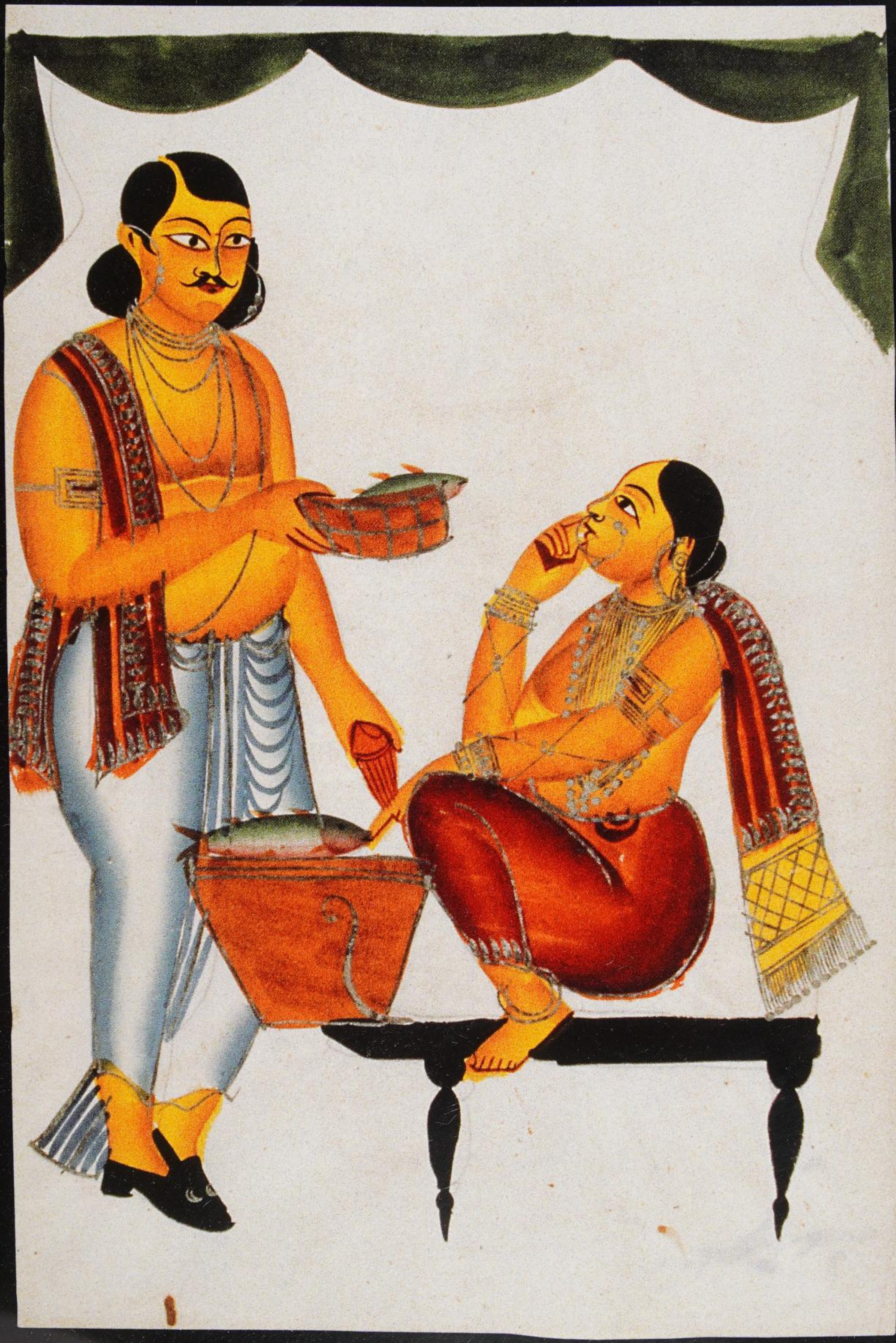
Kriesss Kalee

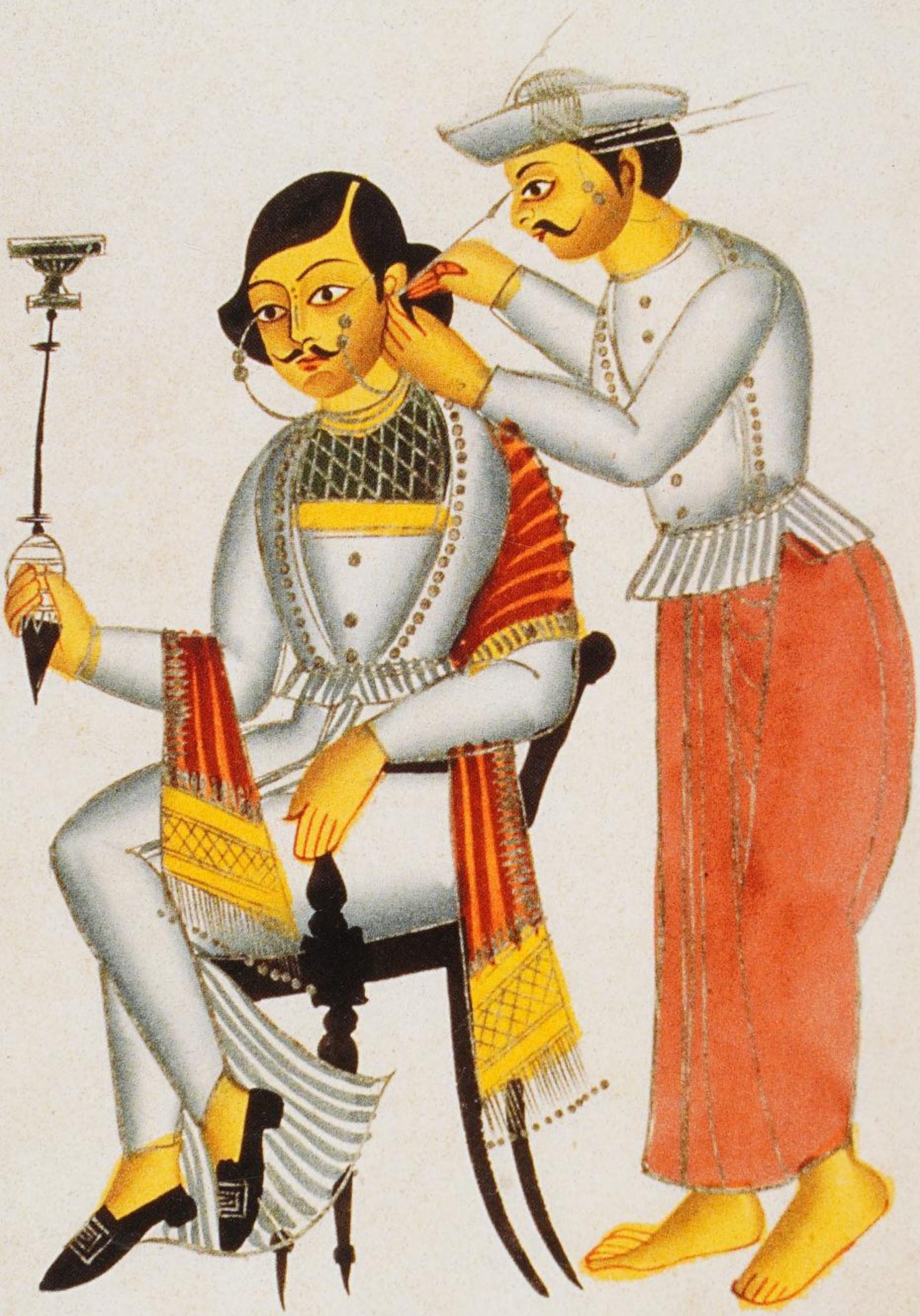


কৃষ্ণকালী

Śiva
Durgā

Shiva & Durga





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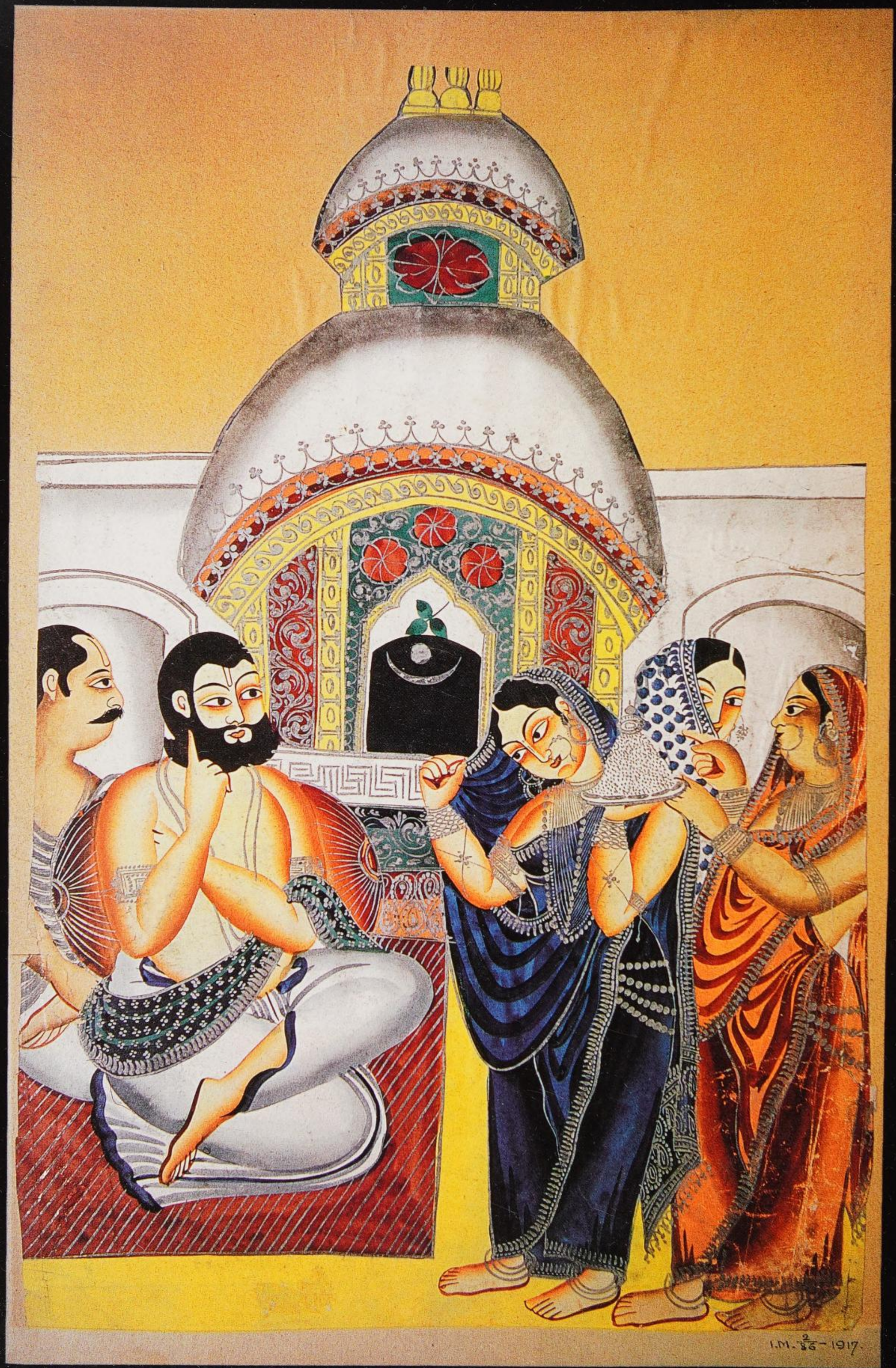
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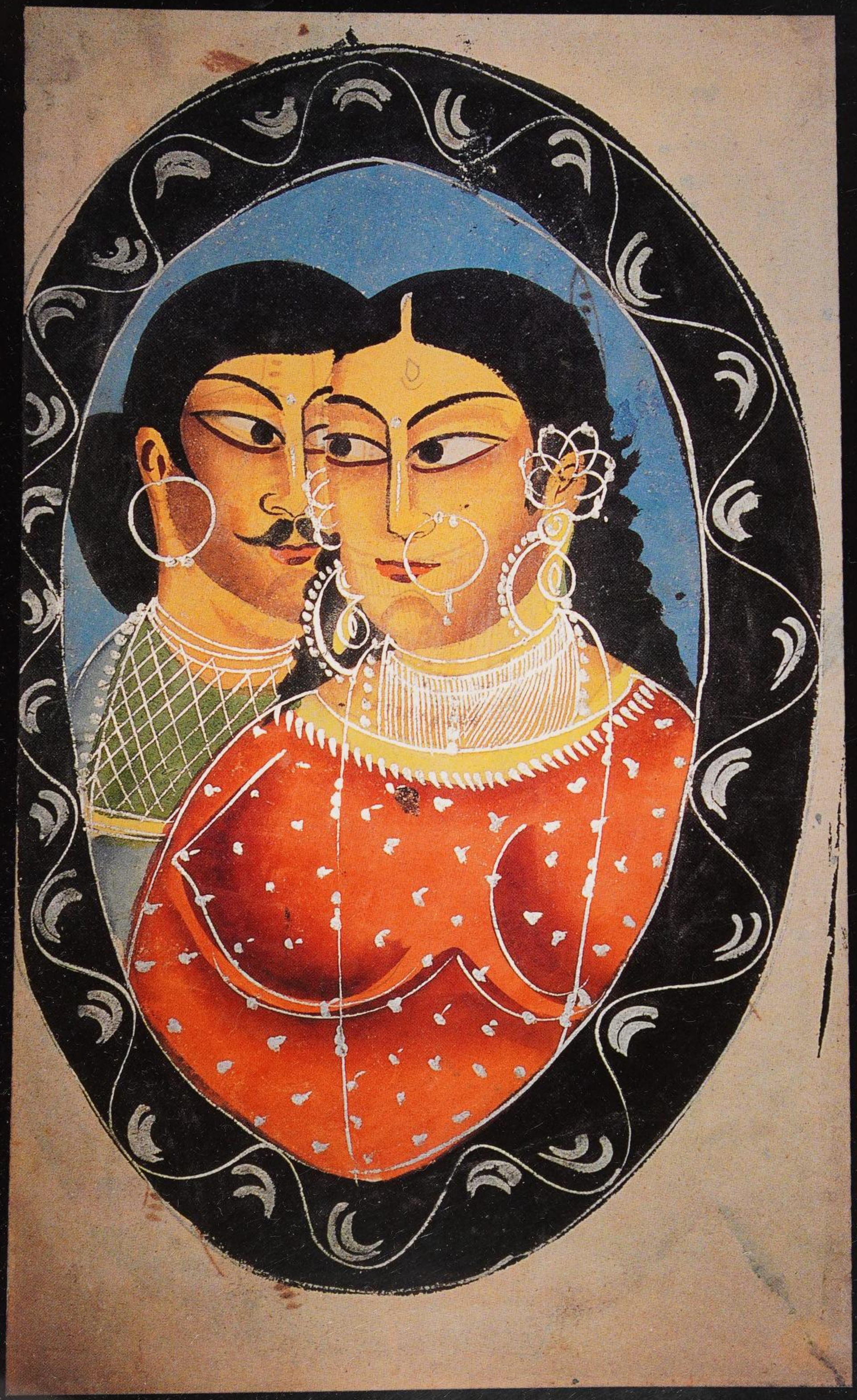

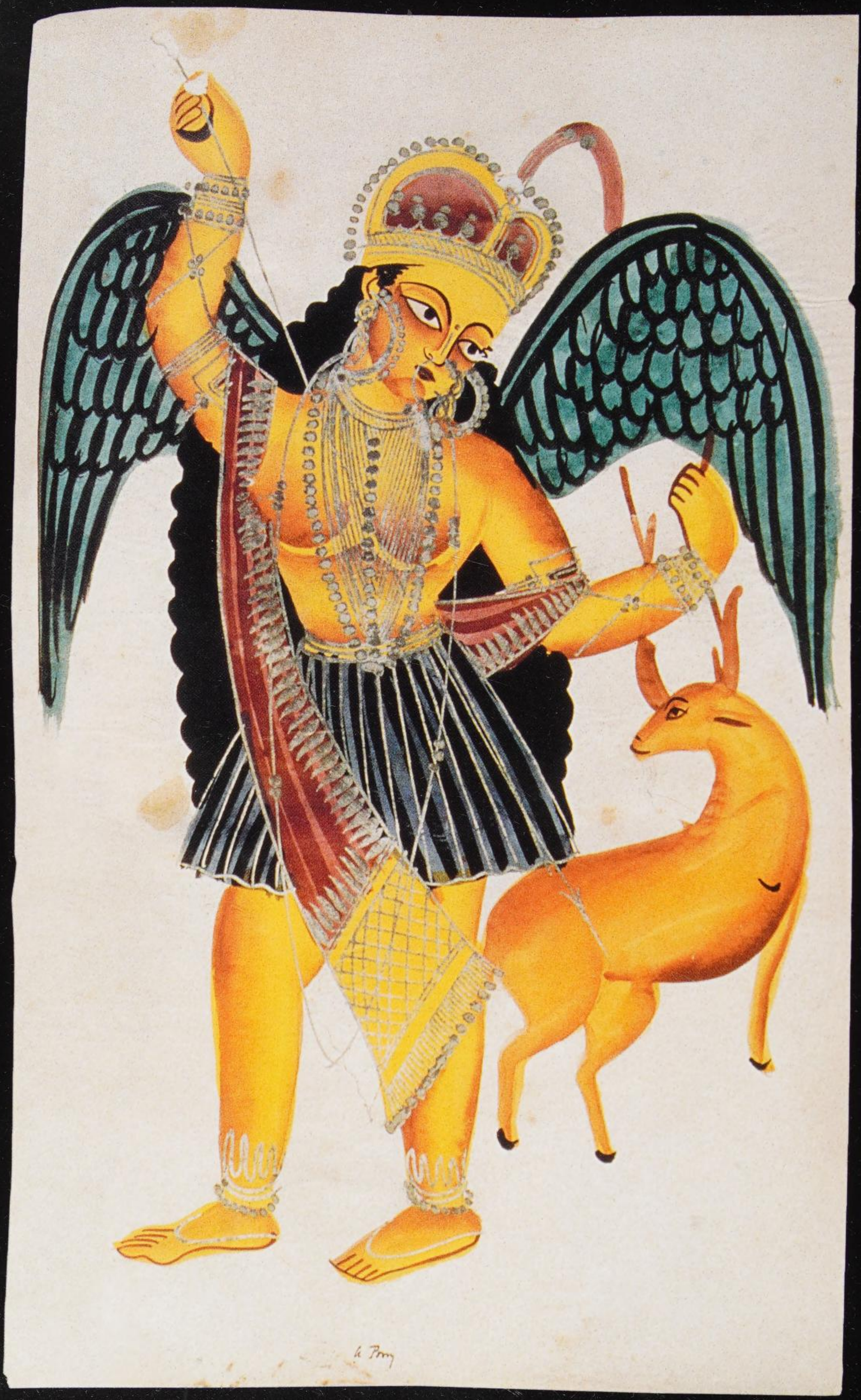

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Glossary

babu: a term used for a male member of Western educated upper class gentry in 19th century Calcutta.

Battala: an area in Calcutta known for concentration of publishers of cheap books, especially in the 19th century.

bhadralok: a term for the upper class in Bengal.

bhaskara: a faction of a broader group of artisans primarily engaged in stone carving in Bengal.

bheestie, bisti: water carrier.

bibi: a courtesan or a female counter part of babu

chala, chalchitra: a semicircular painted paper arch placed behind the image of Durga having depictions of Shiva, Durga and other deities.

chhau: a form of folk dance-cum-theatrical performance involving use of masks prevalent in Purulia and other parts of North Bengal.

chitrakara: a caste of painters.

damru: double-headed tension drum associated with Shiva.

ejuraj: diminutive of 'educated raja'.

fauzdar: title adopted by a faction of *sutradhar* carpenters of Bishnupur, West Bengal.

gaddi: throne with mattresses.

gharwana: family tradition.

ghat: a pot.

haveli: a palatial mansion.

jatra: a form of folk theatre popular in Bengal.

kakubha: a musical melody personified as woman in the company of a peacock.

kathakata: narrator of stories.

kazi: a Muslim priest.

khemta: a form of folk dance of Bengal.

kobi: a poet.

kumor: a potter.

lila: manifestations of events of Krishna's life.

Mahant: a temple priest.

mela: a fair.

nawabi: in the fashion of a *nawab*, a provincial Muslim ruler.

nayika: a woman in amorous mood or a heroine of a literary work.

nikah: Islamic rite of marriage.

paan: a betel leaf.

padavali kirtan: devotional songs especially of Vaishnava sect of Hindus.

panchali: religious singing in combination with recitation

pat, pata: a painted panel or scroll

patua: a painter and a picture showman

phool-babu: 'flower-delicate fop'

pitambara: epithet of Krishna wearing a yellow garment

puja: a form of invocation and worship in Hinduism

putul nach: a puppet theatre

safa: a form of turban

samaj bandhini: an ethnic group

sara: a concave terracotta disc having painted depictions of Lakshmi, Durga or other deities

shervani: a long coat for men

sutradhar: a caste of carpenters

swang: a pantomime theatre

tentul: tamarind

zamindari: landlordship

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